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Viewpoint

Content: Now That You Have It, What Do You Do With It?

Why you need an efficient content distribution strategy, and four secrets that will help get you there

by [Jack Jia](#)

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VIEWPOINT Let's say you've effectively launched an Internet portal, you have an online ordering system, and your automated CRM application is up and running.

Congratulations. You've won half the battle of the new millennium. What you may still be lacking is the most efficient way to get your content from here to there ... and there and there. With the maturity of the Internet Age, the savviest IT professionals are now focused on managing *content distribution*.

It's Not Just Documents Anymore

So you have the cool Flash demo, the hot PR info that gets updated four times daily, the dazzling catalog data, and the just-click-here ordering system. What do you *really* have? The reality is that you're talking about a whole bunch of database and file system-based content, and code. Most modern content stores, in fact, are made up of these three components.

Clearly, it would be foolish to think of your content as individual items. Your business documents, portal content, and eCommerce applications are no longer entities unto themselves, simply moving from Point A to Point B. Instead, you would do well to consider the concept of *transactional content deployment*. Quite honestly, it's an all-or-nothing deal.

The Whole Enchilada

Transactional deployment encompasses all of the assets, code, and processes needed to move your content from the development environment into production. In most cases, you're talking about a collection of thousands -- or even millions -- of pieces of content, each with the potential to severely muck up the works if not handled properly.

You'd never want your content to be only partially deployed -- think what would happen if your online customers couldn't find a product's price, or someone tried to click through the purchasing process and came up empty-handed. Yet a renegade router or unexpected power failure could produce just such a disaster -- and without an efficient means of backing up and rescheduling your entire deployment, your frustrated customers would quickly be looking elsewhere.

Prior Solutions Fell Short

Before the dawn of content distribution systems, the most primitive method of content deployment required a member of the Web team to make a physical change to the production application server. But this approach lacked accountability on many levels: There was no guarantee that the content was good or bad, there was no ability to determine who'd released what and when, and teams frequently lost track of the entire process.

The more informed organizations backed off and made due with a staging server, using freeware like FTP or RSYNC to move content from the staging to the production environment. But the reality of physically moving millions of pieces of content every time a file had to be changed proved exhausting, and was even more susceptible to mistakes.

Things got even worse when "the production server" was no longer one system, but a farm with anywhere from ten to a hundred servers or more. Consider the content deployment challenges faced by leading financial institutions, which must maintain thousands of dedicated servers for their mutual fund managers. Updating entire content stores each time a financial property changes, then sending them out via FTP would be nothing short of a nightmare. Equally disheartening, the system couldn't possibly scale to accommodate future growth.

Most of the enterprises customers with whom I speak have dozens to hundreds of pre-built deployment collections. The most efficient use their content distribution systems to set a variety of deployments: time-based, event-driven, push, ad hoc etc. To support this model, the best content distribution systems now have a built-in user interface that enables the IT team to easily modify and partition their content distribution.

The Four Secrets

What do you need for efficient transactional content deployment/ distribution? From my perspective, there are a few not-so-obvious needs:

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1. *Undo Function* -- Your deployment application should enable you to "undo" any mistakes, or recapture content in the event of a power failure. You don't want to publish content that's incorrect, yet you don't want to have to go searching through thousands of assets to see where that incorrect content resides. Your content distribution system should allow you to abort your deployment, yet safely retrieve any desired version of your content.

2. *Security* -- When you transfer content across a network, the security of that content becomes critical. Thus, you will need powerful encryption tools as part of your content deployment strategy. The strongest technology (128-bit encryption) will render your content unreadable to prying eyes.

3. *Code Support* -- It's not enough to have cool content. You want your customers to do something with it! Alas, if you can't load your newly created content into dynamic business applications, you'll see nary a blip in your bottom line. You must be able to deploy and execute the code that keeps your applications humming in the background, so your online properties look and function their best out front.

4. *Automated Deploy and Run* -- Your content distribution system must be able to perform sys admin-like functions when it ships content and code from place to place, much like the person who unloads the new cars in a dealer's showroom. A Deploy and Run capability will allow you to conduct administrative jobs without someone physically sitting at your server farm to receive the new content. For example, you should be able to take servers 1 through 10 down in order to load up your new content, while servers 11 through 20 keep all applications and processes running seamlessly. Likewise, you can then restart, redirect your load balance back to the first group of servers, and perform all necessary operations while the second group is being updated, without any loss of service to your customers.

What's In It for You?

Assuming you've included the right content distribution system as a part of your overall IT strategy, what benefits can you expect? I would venture to say that your productivity and ROI will see an equal, appreciable boost through:

- *Operational Efficiency* -- Free of a manual, error-prone process, your content will immediately get to the right place at the right time. You'll have fewer emails flying around your organization from employees trying to track down content versions and deployments. And with an automated deployment system in place, your IT team can focus on other tasks.
- *Higher-quality Content* -- Making content easier to deploy enables contributors to update it more frequently, thereby ensuring that it's constantly fresh and your applications are engaging. Bottom line: your customers will return more often, increasing your revenue potential.
- *Unlimited Content Reuse* -- If you've spent \$50K on a Flash demo, it's no good if you can only use it once. Realistically, you should be able to repurpose every last one of your millions of assets in other applications. The ability to deploy only the "delta" means that you'll never see mistakes when any piece of existing content is deployed ... your content will always go out together as part of a collection, or as the "transaction" we mentioned earlier.

A Final Thought ...

At present, most enterprises do not have fully realized content distribution strategies in place. The focus still seems to be on content development, which is equally critical. But you as an IT professional should begin evaluating content deployment systems. In so doing, you will improve your company's operational efficiencies, and help create a full content lifecycle management process. By bringing more intelligence to your network, your enterprise can realize the true value of its corporate knowledge store.

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