

Re-Use IT

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As the "Energy from Waste" plant nears completion, the re-use and re-cycle debate continues the outcome of which we will have to wait for. However, to a lesser or greater degree we all re-use and recycle, if you doubt me, take a look in your garage or garden shed and you will see what I mean! Perhaps the best exponents of this lifestyle are the generations that lived through the austerity years of the war and post war era, where re-cycling and re-use was out of necessity rather than desire, unlike the disposable culture that our children are being brought up in today.

To most of us, re-use is related to something physical such as re-using coffee jars to store screws in or those kitchen units that you have just taken out being used in the potting shed or garage as extra storage space. With it being a physical presence it gives us that feeling of wellbeing and achievement that we have not thrown something out, but re-used it and saved some money in the process.

But what about the things that you can't touch and feel! How do we re-use these to get the same feelings? As a business how much information do you have in your organisation that is at the least duplicated? I would suggest a lot less than you had 10 or even 5 years ago, but there will still be some. The most common areas of duplication in businesses and organisations are names and addresses / personal details and general information such as brochures and documents.

Let's look then at the simplest form of getting information about your business, products and / or services out to the World Wide Web (or Wibbly Wobbly World as a friend of mine refers to it). The web pages that make up the majority of web sites are constructed using HTML (Hypertext Mark-up Language). Each of the pages within these websites has a style to it e.g. colour, font type, title style, content style and places for images. Each of these pages like a printed brochure is unique, so once established if a change to the overall design is required the whole page needs to be re written. Or if you wanted to put the same data into a website written for a different part of your organisation.

It is for this reason (as well as the additional cost involved) that a growing number of websites are out of step with corporate printed material and why many carrying a 'Last Updated' section whose date is a long time in the past.

Wouldn't it be good then if you could use one set of data to feed more than one website? Updating all by making just one change, whilst using the same data to send specific information to PDA's, Mobile phones, Kiosks, IP Phones and CD's? Surprisingly enough you can, and not unsurprisingly this is something that more and more businesses and organisations in the public

and private sectors are realising and adopting and is something that PDMS has championed over the years and delivered to a growing number of both private and public sector businesses and organisations.

How is this achieved and what has changed to make it possible? Well, I've got another acronym for you XML (eXtensible Mark-up Language). XML is different to HTML in so much as it separates the page content out from the style of the page, so changing one of these aspects does not mean re-writing the other, but more importantly means that you can use the same data to populate different styles of page design and layout, thus providing the opportunity to get your information out to the people who want it, in the manner in which they request it e.g. PDA's, Mobile phones, Kiosks, IP Phones, HTML pages, CD's or documents.

Traditionally using HTML if you wanted to display someone else's data on your web site, you did one of two things, copy their content into your design, which meant that every time their data was updated you had to update yours or simply by linking out to their website. Both of these methods have their own problems, but the latter method meant that the person you had browsing YOUR website has now been sent to someone else's and the likelihood of getting them back once they have left is not very high.

Consider then the benefit that XML brings of being able to display someone else's content or particular parts of it on your website and in your branding, not only do you keep that hard won browser, but you are providing them with the information they need without having to leave your site (the Marketing and Sales people reading this will have the appropriate statistics to show how valuable to the business this concept is) and without you having to update the information supplied!

Examples of this re-use of data can be seen on some smaller betting sites where odds are drawn through from one larger supplier, tourist sites where weather reports, bus and train time tables are provided from a regional supplier and on-line 'bargain' holiday companies where information is drawn from a number of different sources.

Imagine then the feeling of well being that you would get, if you only had to update things once? A halcyon vision or reality? Well, it's as real as the Energy from Waste Plant, only less obtrusive on the eye.