Leading Community College Improves Online User Experience with OpenText

OpenText Web Site Management ideal platform for online expansion strategy at Lone Star College

With 85,000 students, Lone Star College System is the largest educational institution in Houston and consists of five colleges: CyFair, Kingwood, Montgomery, North Harris, and Tomball. Lone Star has experienced tremendous growth over the last few years and is now the fastest-growing community college system in Texas. As a community college, Lone Star offers standard education platforms and also partners with local businesses to provide technical training for a more qualified workforce and runs local community events.

The Lone Star College System website is the main information hub to promote each of their five different colleges and serve the interests of their students and other members of the community. Keeping content up to date and enhancing the user experience with new multimedia features and platforms are all major goals for their website.

By 2007, Lone Star sought to remove a major hurdle to achieving their online goals by replacing their outdated and restrictive web Content Management System (CMS) with a newer, enterprise-level solution that could provide a stable, user-friendly, and scalable platform to manage their website going forward.

OpenText solution selected for ease of use

After examining a number of web content management products, Lone Star selected OpenText Web Site Management. While many factors came into play, one of the main reasons for their decision was the intuitive user interface that enables employees from multiple departments to easily manage their own web content.

Most content authors at Lone Star are administrative assistants, program coordinators, and other department representatives who, in a lot of cases, struggled to make content edits using their former CMS tool. "The system didn't have an intuitive user interface. It was far too technical and really limited what a lot of employees could do.

INDUSTRY

Higher Education

CUSTOMER

Lone Star College System

CHALLENGES

- Restrictive CMS system that limited website growth
- Inconsistent and outdated website information
- Technically challenging CMS user interface
- Inability to properly control content updates

SOLUTION

- OpenText Web Site Management

BENEFITS

- User-friendly solution enables widespread employee use
- Web content updated more frequently and consistently
- Scalable solution enables online growth

> *"It was important that our new system would allow our users to hit the ground running and easily manage their own web information moving forward. The feedback we received from users after testing each solution was that OpenText was leaps and bounds above the other vendors."*

JOHN KING, DIRECTOR OF DIGITAL SERVICES, LONE STAR COLLEGE SYSTEM

As a result, most website updates only occurred once a quarter and often our team had to step in to help troubleshoot and complete the updates for our users. This pulled us away from our work and also slowed down the overall pace of updating our website. Over time, web content became stale and outdated," explains John King, Director of Digital Services at Lone Star College.

In order to ensure the system they selected would be easy for their content authors, Lone Star brought in a select number of vendors onsite to test their product with twenty of their web authors. "We wanted to know from our users if it was easy to add an image, easy to add text, easy to find your content, and so on. It was important that our new system would allow our users to hit the ground running and easily manage their own web information moving forward. The feedback we received from users after testing each solution was that OpenText was leaps and bounds above the other vendors," says King.

Ongoing ability to update and maintain web content

With the installation of Web Site Management in May 2008, each major department, such as Human Resources and Financial Aid, became responsible for their own content and selected designated content editors to manage this information. Each of the five campuses has about 25 active content authors and a web coordinator to oversee the process. The web team located in the central office maintains the overall appearance and navigation structure of the site, but the task of maintaining content is given to web editors within each department.

Content editors are provided with a short training session of about two to four hours where they're shown general guidelines for proper usage and given templates to work from. The solution was adopted very quickly, and there are now over 125 content authors across the entire college system. "We were extremely pleased with the speed of our user adoption, which was due mostly to the enthusiasm within our user base when they discovered how easy the OpenText solution was," says King.

The result of the new process for managing web updates has been a marked improvement in the college's ability to keep online information accurate and up to date. "Employees from multiple departments have become more active participants in building an effective website. They're the experts in their respective departments, so it just makes sense that they should be the ones who own this content and are responsible for maintaining it going forward," says King.

Controlling content for a consistent user experience

In order to ensure that they maintain a consistent look and feel for their website, Lone Star uses a workflow process where content doesn't go live on the site until it's reviewed by a web coordinator or the central web team. "One of the issues we had before was that sometimes there was inconsistent information being displayed on our different campus sites. For example,

we found that there were different tuition and financial aid pages on each site when the college as a whole only has one set of policies for these areas. This kind of information should be maintained by one group and locked so that only one page shows up on each of the five campus sites. Using the built-in workflow system that the OpenText tool provides allows us to avoid this kind of inconsistency. We have designated people review the content before it goes live," says King.

While the overall branding is controlled and the navigation structure is locked, each campus is able to publish unique content on their sites by maintaining their own subpages. They're able to advertise and promote events that are unique to their campuses, but the overall appearance of the web pages stays consistent to ensure that visitors know they're still on the Lone Star College website.

A stable and flexible platform to manage future growth

Another major benefit with the OpenText implementation is that Lone Star now has a much more stable system that provides a scalable platform to support the growing needs of their website. "Our former system wasn't capable of doing even some of the most elementary things that we thought should be standard in a CMS solution. Controlling the look and feel was nearly impossible, and we had little freedom to make changes to the site. When we wanted to add new features to the site, we didn't have the flexibility to make those modifications ourselves but had to contact the vendor each time. The system was also technically unstable and constantly crashed on us," says King.

With Web Site Management, Lone Star has gone from a rigid website and a CMS that limited their abilities to make meaningful changes to a more open system with the freedom to easily manage their site. "If we want to create new templates, layouts, or add multimedia and other elements to the site, we can do that now without hesitation," says King.

Using the OpenText system, Lone Star has added more advanced scripting and updated the navigation structure to improve the overall user experience. They've also ramped up the inclusion of multimedia and other elements to enhance their website

and keep up with the overall changes in the marketplace. "With our primary audience being young students, it's important that we stay on top of these things and the OpenText system is instrumental in giving us the flexibility to do that," says King.

Managing content for a mobile strategy

One of the innovations that Lone Star has effectively launched with the help of OpenText is a mobile version of their website. The motivation to produce a mobile site came about after Lone Star examined their web statistics and noticed that a growing number of users were accessing their site using mobile devices. To accommodate these users, Lone Star decided to launch a separate version of their website that was optimized for viewing on a mobile device.

A key part of this strategy was ensuring that users would be able to access all the same content on the mobile site that was available on the website. When the team looked at what other educational institutions had done with their mobile sites, one of the things they found were a lot of instances of incomplete or out-of-date information. "A lot of these mobile sites appeared to have been built independently from that institutions' main website. Information on the mobile site was lacking, and this was something we wanted to avoid when creating our mobile strategy," says King.

Rather than manage two separate websites and update content for each one, Lone Star uses the OpenText system and automatically publishes web content for each different format. Two publishing targets occur every night, where content gets published to both the mobile directory and to the web server directory. The mobile directory contains style sheets that are optimized for displaying web information on a mobile phone.

"Having a mobile site is a big benefit— especially for our younger users who have become accustomed to accessing the web in this manner. It was important for us when employing this strategy that we didn't lose sight of our overall goal, which is to provide an information-rich website for our online visitors. After going live with a soft launch over the past few months we've received overwhelmingly positive feedback and are looking forward to where we can take this in the future," says King.

LSCS - 5000 Research Forest Drive, The Woodlands, TX 77381-4356

Conclusion

Online traffic has grown significantly over the past few years, and the Lone Star website now averages close to 1.5 million visits per month. "We can attribute this increase to our surge in student enrollment but also to the value we're now able to offer our online visitors. The simple user interface means that our employees across the company can manage web information in a meaningful way and our time is freed up to focus on building new online features and multimedia content that adds value to our site," says King.

Lone Star College's main focus has continued to be student success and ensuring that their website content is fresh and updated regularly. "We want to be able to provide content that helps students succeed along the whole process, whether that's making sure they have easy access to research tools or study aids or multimedia content. Recently we began looking at including videos of our alumni sharing their college experience with our first-year students. We want to keep our students on a clear path towards a meaningful career, and we view our website as one of the ways we can do that," concludes King. ■