Macmillan onestopenglish.com

↘ Moving a thriving community site to a subscription model

Set up by Macmillan Education in 2000, onestopenglish.com was launched purely as a marketing site for the company's English language teaching coursebooks. The site was an immediate success. By 2006, it had become a vibrant community site for more than 250,000 English language teachers around the world, offering free access to more than 2,000 pages and 7,000 PDFs of lesson plans and other invaluable English teaching aids. However, the need to provide significant new facilities combined with the desire to commission large amounts of new content to meet the needs of onestopenglish registered users prompted the decision in early 2006 to move to a subscription model.

The new subscription-based site was launched in August 2006, based on Abacus e-Media's Webstructure content management solution. According to Emma Shercliff, Managing Director of English Campus, which is the Macmillan company responsible for onestopenglish.com: "We ran the very real risk of alienating our users and destroying what has become a unique resource for worldwide English language teachers. However, despite the short timescales to get the new website and content management system and up and running, it has been a huge success both from the point of view of our users and as a role model for a subscription-based internet publishing enterprise within the Macmillan Group."

↘ The challenge of change

The success of onestopenglish.com is one which many internet sites would gladly emulate. With relatively little marketing effort or budget, the site grew to attract some 10,000 new registered users every month, with between 300-800 people being online at any one time.

The original flat HTML website was developed using FrontPage. In 2004, as the site began to buckle under the weight of its content, it was moved to DreamWeaver to provide a more powerful web production tool. However, uploading the content continued to be a laborious and extremely manually intensive task. Each link had to be individually crafted and according to Claire Sawyer, Web Editor at onestopenglish.com: "It was notoriously difficult to check where an item had been uploaded to and thus there was always the risk of errors being made."

The need to invest in a professional content management system which would automate and simplify many of the processes involved in maintaining and updating the website raised the issue of moving to a subscription model. With the aim of preserving its role in the English language teaching world and not alienating users, the fundamentally important decision was taken to retain all the existing content and provide it free of charge, but also to provide extensive new facilities and more searchable content to justify the annual fee.

Emma Shercliff: "onestopenglish.com is a very strong Macmillan brand and we are all fiercely protective of it. We initiated some user group testing and workshops to glean feedback on the proposed new site, and also commissioned some consultancy from EPS – all with the aim of retaining the strong community aspect of the site."

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Choosing a solution

In April 2006, a tender was produced and sent to four potential suppliers of content management solutions. A specific requirement was that the selected supplier should have knowledge of the publishing industry and the implementation of subscription services.

From a shortlist of two companies, Abacus e-Media was selected. Chris Daly, the onestopenglish Project Manager said: "The feedback from our editorial staff – which was obviously very influential in our decision-making – came out strongly in favour of the Webstructure product from Abacus. It appeared to be straightforward and easy to use. In addition, Abacus had gone to considerable effort to include in their response to the tender and subsequent presentation how Webstructure would work for onestopenglish.com, rather than just giving us a generic view of the product."

The decision to adopt Webstructure was taken in May and the new web site was launched on the agreed date of 23 August.

Abacus e-Media recommended a two phase approach to the design and implementation of the new site. The first phase involved detailed requirements gathering – information which had not been included in the original tender document because of pressure of time. The second phase was the actual design and development which included migration of all the content (as well as all existing user IDs and passwords), from the old site to the new one, a responsibility which lay with Abacus. Applying metadata and the requisite tagging – which would enable the site to be quickly and easily searched – was undertaken in-house by onestopenglish.com.

Assessing the results

According to Emma Shercliff: "We were concerned that there might be a hostile reaction from our users when the new site went live but feedback to date has been overwhelmingly positive. We've had perhaps half a dozen irate emails from users who have failed to notice that all the content from the original site is still available at no charge – but as soon as this is drawn to their attention, they too are more than happy with the changes.

"It is hard to overemphasise how much the users feel that onestopenglish is their own site – which, of course, has made it even more challenging for us to bring them with us through this major change in the history of the site."

One of the most important new features provided by Webstructure is the ability for users to undertake basic and advanced searches. In the old site users had to browse their way through to try and find relevant information. Now they can search on keywords across all documents (including the content of all the PDFs), and by level of course, type of English, content type and age.

Claire Sawyer: "In the old FrontPage and DreamWeaver-based site, it was impossible to search the PDFs which, given that there are some 7,000 of them on the site, was a serious drawback. Now all the worksheets and teachers notes are tagged with metadata for ease of searching.

"We are now able to upload lessons (based on our partnership with Guardian Weekly) on a weekly basis, rather than monthly because the whole process is so much more straight-forward and efficient. This combined with the powerful back office management capabilities of Webstructure means that the potential for errors has been dramatically reduced.

"Webstructure is extremely flexible. We are not tied to pre-formatted templates, and are able to move blocks of content around or change the navigation, whenever we feel that this would be helpful to our users."

Planning for the future

The community aspect of the site and the strong views of onestopenglish.com's users is ensuring that Emma Shercliff and her team are receiving considerable feedback on the new features and content. The ability to carry out online polling and surveys, using the Abacus Inform product, will be used in the future to encourage even more feedback from users on how they would like the site to develop in the future.

Emma Shercliff: "From a management point of view, I am delighted that we are now in control of the publishing process. Before the launch of the new site, we had to wait for the IT department to upload content for us. Now we can make instantaneous changes and publish content whenever we want to.

"Clearly this has been a hugely important project for onestopenglish and its users, but it has also raised the profile of the site within Macmillan and is providing a role model for an internet publishing operation with real-time subscriptions."

Claire Sawyer: "Webstructure will enable us to take risks, to be experimental and to innovate. We can interact quickly and easily with our users, responding to their needs, and also offer niche or specialist material which wouldn't be financially viable for a traditional publisher to produce, but which is just the type of information our users look to us for."

Emma Shercliff concluded: "Overall, I am really proud of what we have all achieved in such a short period of time."