Improving Plone and Zope
Market Acceptance

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Introduction

The title of this paper is: "Improving Plone and Zope Market Acceptance". Let's parse the semantics of this title:

Improving — We acknowledge that any product can and will improve over time based on a feedback loop where suggestions will be implemented and released in future versions.

Plone and Zope — Neither of these names is suggestive of the underlying product's features or capabilities. Therefore it would be useful to add a brief tagline when mentioning either product in a formal setting or when the name is used in any written material. Example: *Plone – the open source content management system for developing websites*.

Market Acceptance — We would like to grow the market presence and adoption of Plone and Zope by increasing the number developers actively using or considering Plone and Zope.

Combining "Improving" with "Plone and Zope" and "Market Acceptance" — gives us the stated goal: combining our varied talents to improve not just the technical features and capabilities of Plone and Zope, but also to figure out what can be done to make step-function sized breakthroughs to increase the mindshare owned by Plone and Zope.

Profiling the Parties in the Website Development Ecosystem

As a first step, it's helpful to identify and segment the different parties who are potential users of Plone / Zope and who are involved in the decision making process.

The worldwide ecosystem of interested parties involved in website and web application development has become enormous. Accordingly, there are few unifying themes among the various parties other than the mutual goal of having a "good" website as the final product. However the definition of what is good is entirely subjective. Many other requirements such as the ability to leverage existing resources and a desire to integrate the new project with existing enterprise applications contend for attention in the decision process. To get a clear idea of how we might increase the buzz and attention for Plone and Zope, let's profile some of the interested parties.

Small Businesses (1-10 employees, no full-time IT staff)

Small business website needs are well served by pre-packaged, template-based websites provided at reasonable cost by large companies such as Yahoo and 1and1.com. The setup and recurring fees charged by these vendors are low and the process for getting the website operational is straightforward. It's hard to imagine being able to competitively price a Plone / Zope based website service against these vendors. The need for a small business to integrate with other business applications is usually minimal and there is rarely a sufficient budget to pay for a Plone / Zope developer's time.

Medium Sized Businesses (10-100 employees, full-time IT staff)

Organizations of this size are where real opportunities for a Plone / Zope based website begin to emerge. Often there are detailed and sufficient requirements for the website, making a pre-packaged website or something relatively simple unacceptable. Requirements that might drive a medium sized business to consider using Plone / Zope include:

a) The need to integrate the new website with other software.

b) The need to write custom software for the website to accomplish a specific function.

c) The need for additional web applications which function in a manner similar to the website.

d) The need for the website to be multilingual in a transparent manner.

e) The need for a team of people to work on the website simultaneously.

f) The need for a defined editing and publishing process.

g) Internal IT staff are too busy to address the website by themselves.

h) There exists a desire to use open-source software, based on prior internal successes with other open-source applications such as Linux or Apache.

i) The organization does not have a strong inclination to exclusively use the monopoly software company's products.

Each Plone / Zope proponent will have their own insight as to which key features of Plone and Zope are most effective in persuading a prospect to use Plone and Zope, but if a medium sized business does not have ANY of the above requirements, it will be difficult to persuade them to consider Plone and Zope.

Large Businesses (100+ employees)

Large businesses strive to implement consistent, standardized procedures and computer policies throughout the enterprise. But often there is an equivalent acknowledgment that such procedures and policies can not effectively capture all the varying needs throughout the organization. The door may be open to use alternative software products when a persuasive written case can be made for their usage. This is where the Plone and Zope community can assist by providing standardized language for use in proposals. Successful implementations of Plone / Zope websites are plentiful and a collective knowledge base of success stories and case studies can and should be assembled by the community. As this collection of evidence grows and begins to capture hard financial data, its ability to sway decisions will also increase. Large businesses are often the only customers of expensive industry reports, so providing a Plone / Zope justification of similar format, quality, and authority goes a long way to persuading internal staff.

Because large businesses have internal staff who are in a position to evaluate the technical merits of a proposal to use Plone and Zope, it is appropriate to include specific Plone / Zope technical details and how they might match up with the organization's larger goals. For example:

a) Plone is merely one web application of a larger open-source web application development environment: Zope.

b) Plone and Zope servers run on Linux, Windows, and Mac operating systems.

c) Plone and Zope connect to SQL databases without additional third party software.

d) The Python programming language can be used to extend the capabilities of any Plone website. Mentioning that Google makes extensive use of Python in their software increases Python's perceived value.[1]

Note that the listing above (under medium sized businesses) of potential website requirements must also be met.

Governments & Non-Profit Organizations

This should be a path of least resistance, as governments often have mandates or obligations to promote quality open-source software as a means of encouraging competition and reducing overall costs. Non-Profit Organizations often have modest budgets for all aspects of their operations, particularly IT, and hence should be receptive to the message of open-source software. However, there may be specific ways to leverage the website of a Non-Profit to increase donations or overall revenues, causing the new website to pay for itself.

In attempting to make a persuasive argument to a Government organization to use Plone / Zope, it is critical to assess the technical proficiency of the Government representatives and to present appropriate information.

Doing work for Non-Profit Organizations is usually quite different because the decision makers may be diffuse and it may be almost impossible to get all relevant parties into one room at the same time so that their concerns and requirements can be voiced. When this author approaches Non-Profit Organizations, I tend to stress how Plone is easily able to keep up with the dynamic nature of the content a Non-Profit must continually publish.

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Non-Profit Organizations can be further divided into industry advocacy groups funded by commercial businesses, and organizations that serve purely humanitarian or altruistic purposes. Funding a new IT project is usually less of a problem for industry advocacy groups.

Developers

The Plone community is a highly intelligent, open-minded group that in most cases has worked with numerous other website / web application development tools and settled on Plone. Each of us had a process we went through in moving to Plone and those collective experiences should be pooled and distilled into a single voice. Additional reasons why this author became interested in Plone include:

a) Plone is merely one web application of an entire web application development environment: Zope.

b) No PC software is required to implement a Plone / Zope website — only a browser is used.

c) Important issues regarding how to properly scale and grow a website have already been met and implemented with Plone / Zope. It's unlikely that there will be a future point in time when your website's requirements exceed Plone / Zope's capabilities.

End-Users

Although end-users are not always part of the decision-making process, they can and should be profiled for each new website project. That information can be fed back into the proposal to improve its effectiveness. For example, if the website needs to be accessible to an audience with physical handicaps, the proposal can describe how Plone / Zope meets that need. The more details and the more accurately the end-users can be profiled, the stronger the case can be made for Plone. Compatibility across numerous browser platforms is another strong point in Plone / Zope's favor.

Comparing Plone with Other Content Management Systems

See the author's previous paper: "Plone: A Web-Based System for Knowledge Management and Learning Systems"[2] for a technical and business-case discussion comparing Plone with other Content Management Systems.

Greatest Challenges to Overcome

Plone / Zope have a number of challenges to overcome before the platform will start to "bubble-up" to the top of a list of potential products for new website design projects for groups of people who have never heard of Plone / Zope. And that appears to be the largest obstacle to overcome: outside of our own community, *Plone is largely anonymous*. In the last three months, fewer than 15 "mass-market" news stories mentioned Plone or Zope.[3] This compares with 281 matches for "Visual Studio" conducted over the same time period.[4] 8,853 searches included the text: ".php" near the term: "http".[5] 22,438 searches included the text: ".asp" near the term: "http".[6]

Another key issue to overcome is to get existing developers to look outside of their own skillsets and comfort levels. Developers become locked in for various reasons: the existing sunk costs of a licensed, commercial website development platform, their desire to most effectively leverage their current skillset without needing to learn a new product, or technical mandates within their organization. In each case, the Linux adoption model may be of some assistance: let Plone "sneak" in through one or two small projects. Begin to show the nearly finished product to interested parties within the organization. Interest will develop.

Suggestions for Future Changes

At a recent Flash User's Group meeting in New York City, not one of twelve participants had ever heard of Plone / Zope, despite many of them being involved in high-profile website projects as part of their daytime job.[7] The anonymity of Plone / Zope is a reasonable challenge to overcome. Like most marketing challenges, Plone / Zope's anonymity may be best overcome by a concerted, long-term, multi-channel approach to increasing its visibility. The following are this paper's suggestions:

a) **Create Taglines for "Plone" and "Zope" and Use Them Consistently —** the terms Plone and Zope by themselves have zero relevance or descriptive value for non-Plone / Zope users. Accordingly, taglines should be adopted and used whenever Plone & Zope are mentioned or written about in mainstream media. The process of coming up with agreed-upon taglines may be difficult but the effort should pay off for years to come.

b) **Create and tell Great Stories about the words "Plone" and "Zope"** — the Plone website references the origin of the word Plone.[8] That story should be nurtured and spun into something of general interest and easily memorized by people being introduced to Plone for the very first time.

c) **Create a Known File Extension Such As .plone for Plone Pages** — this is a key way that the monopoly software provider has been able to create instant name recognition regarding the technologies behind websites developed with their software. Similarly, when technical people see any of these suffixes: `.php, .asp, .jsp, or .swf,` it is immediately clear which software technology was used to develop the website. These suffixes become part of the permanent historical record as website links make their way into news stories.

d) **Create a Knowledge Base of Successful Plone Implementations and Case Studies** — as this body of knowledge increases over time, proposal writers will easily be able to gather important information and pass it along to the key decision makers.

e) **Create a Public Relations (PR) Initiative** — for those who have never been involved with the mass media, the process of getting a story published may seem mysterious and difficult. Nothing could be further from the truth. If you attend the Plone 2006 conference and come away with some new ideas, that's news. There are reporters that would like to write about the conference, what was presented, and what you learned. All it takes is a phone call or an email to a journalist to get things started. If the Plone community wanted to formalize the process, a PR committee could be brought into fruition with the task of developing and maintaining a "buzz" about Plone. Members of the committee would have their name appear in stories, helping to create value for the committee members and convincing them that it is worth their time to participate in the effort.

Closing Remarks

Plone is largely anonymous outside of our own community. Greater market acceptance would result in widely-distributed benefits for all of us. Moving from a product that has strong appeal to the most technical, most intelligent developers to something that has broad market appeal with easy name recognition will require new efforts and changes to Plone's existing market positioning. A like-minded group of people with the desire to see this happen should coalesce, develop a plan, and see it through. The benefits of this effort will last for many years.

About the Author

Based in New York City, Robert Burgoyne is co-founder of True Blade Systems, Inc., a provider of computer services for the Financial Services Industry. Before True Blade Robert worked in the

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financial services industry at PaineWebber and other firms. Previously Robert held positions doing computer consulting and software development, including being a member of a team that developed the first highly successful client-server database system for Bell Atlantic (now Verizon). Robert holds a B.S. in Physics from the University of Maryland, College Park (UMCP). In his free time Robert enjoys exercising, photography, and improving his conversational Mandarin Chinese language skills.

[1] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Python_software

[2] Burgoyne, Robert (2006). "Plone: A Web-Based System for Knowledge Management and Learning Systems". Society for Applied Learning Technology 2006 Conference on Interactive Technologies for Training and Education. www.salt.org

[3] Factiva searches conducted October 21, 2006. www.factiva.com

[4] Factiva searches conducted October 21, 2006. www.factiva.com

[5] Factiva searches conducted October 21, 2006. www.factiva.com

[6] Factiva searches conducted October 21, 2006. www.factiva.com

[7] Flash Coders New York User's Group Meeting, October 3, 2006. www.flashcodersny.org

[8] http://plone.org/documentation/faq/name

Note: All website citations were based on the website being accessed on October 21, 2006.