How to Evaluate
Website Technology Platforms

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About this Whitepaper

What?

This whitepaper presents and describes the approach our solution architects uses to match the ideal CMS platform to each client's unique business case.

Why?

Choosing a CMS platform can be a difficult decision, based on technical details that have a significant impact on the long-term success of your website, and are often overlooked. The purpose of this whitepaper is to explain the technical aspects of CMS platforms that determine your current and ongoing web strategy.

Who Wrote This?

Bear Group is a development firm based in Seattle, Washington. Since 2007, Bear Group has worked with marketing teams to help build websites that fit into existing strategies, support goals, and help their companies thrive.

How Can Bear Group Help?

We frequently work with clients to find a CMS platform that matches the goals they have for their new website. We walk them through the decision making process and present a few likely candidates for them to choose from, giving them final say over their platform. Our role is to give our client total control over their project, which includes walking them through certain territories of the web development landscape they may not be familiar with.

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Evaluating Website Platforms— What You Really Need To Be Paying Attention To

The success of your website is dependent on many different factors— the value of its content to users, your ability to build demand and drive traffic, your content strategy, design and user experience (UX), strength of development, security of your systems—but the first influencer is the technology that sits underneath and powers your website. **Your platform.**

Whether you're building your business's first website, or updating your current website, finding the right platform isn't always a straightforward decision.

• What platform is best for websites run by small businesses?
• Is there a platform that can handle the customization needs of an enterprise-level business, or does it need to be built entirely on custom code?

In this whitepaper, we're going to evaluate Content Management Systems (CMS) as the common publishing platform modern websites are built over.

CHAPTER 1
CMS Parity

Due to what is often referred to as the "Wordpress Effect," (because other CMS's frequently follow Wordpress and adopt or imitate its feature releases) Content Management System evolution has been largely static the last several years. CMS's are at parity and offer nearly identical feature sets. For example, both Drupal and Wordpress offer customizable fields and extensive content management capabilities, but one is undoubtedly a better fit for you than the other.

But while they may offer the same feature sets, and may be capable of creating equally high-performing websites, the platform you choose determines your workflow, how you update your website, and how it operates with other tools in your stack.

It's a nuanced decision that will require you to look beyond the marketing and admin-facing features and evaluate the actual technology.

Each of our clients come to us with a different business plan, a different set of needs, and a different strategy to set themselves apart. And while the specifics of their project may be different, the evaluation process we use to determine the platform that's the best fit for their team is the same.

This is how we walk through that process, and how we evaluate website platforms for the right fit.

Signs That You Need a New Platform

Some website issues can be solved with tweaks to the user experience, like refreshing homepage graphics or expanding navigation for a new line of business. But others may be signs your platform's time has come and needs to be replaced. Determining the problems caused by your current platform will help you plan your next steps, and clarify how your next platform needs to be different.

What Issues Are You Experiencing With Your Current Website?
Like the engine in your car, your website's engine (the platform it's built on) isn't often something you actively think about or even pay attention to until it begins to cause you problems. Here are some of the most common symptoms of a faulty platform:

Any Security Issues

Platform security is an aspect of your website that requires consistent updates. For a supported CMS, there are security teams, security notifications, and security patch releases that address recent issues or vulnerabilities in your system. If your website platform doesn't stay up-to-date with security patch releases, it's incredibly vulnerable to being hacked or hijacked. A home-grown CMS, custom built over ASP for a single customer, an older CMS version no longer supported with patch releases, or CMS extensions in use that are not getting updated are just a few sources of many site breaches.

Facing Functional Limitations

Some CMS's that prevent your development team from directly getting at your platform's code can become a blocker. For example, if you're facing difficulty integrating your website with your CRM, Analytics, ERP, or other systems, your platform may be too "closed" to support the type of development you want to accomplish.

When most digital strategies revolve around the aggregation and implementation of data, integrating different systems together is a necessary step. Most systems are built to support integration—providing API's and integration code—but issues arise when there's a lack of customization capability in your platform. In order to avoid a

system where integrations are simply tacked on one to each other—what we call a "spaghetti system"—your website needs to be able to communicate data in different ways.

Upkeep Has Become Too Expensive

A high-performance, custom website will require some ongoing maintenance, but it shouldn't cost you $40,000 a year to simply maintain and upkeep patching, support, hosting, and updates to just keep the lights on. If your website platform is exceeding your anticipated costs, looking for an alternative solution can allow you to redirect your budget to other aspects of leveraging your web presence.

Unnecessary Dependencies

As website developers, we frequently hear "I have to rely on my developer to update my images, tagging, content, etc. and I don't want to have to rely on the developer to do those things anymore."

It's simple, you work within your website everyday. You should feel comfortable and fully capable of managing your own website. Whether due to the complexity of your platform ("you'll need IT to do that") or because your platform's capabilities are too limited to support your business objectives (maybe you want to create a landing page featuring information from your event management system, or you want your website to channel data to your CRM in a specific way, but your website interacts with third-party systems in a limited way) not being in control of a tool that occupies the center of your digital strategy is the biggest sign of a poor platform fit, and also the most common motivator behind pursuing a new website build.

> In 2017, you shouldn't need to call a developer to do anything content related.

It could also be that you don't have anyone who knows how to manage your website, whether this is because you can't get in touch with the developer that built the site for you a few years ago, or all of your experienced staff has since left. The main appeal of most modern CMS website platforms is that they are built for non-technical editors and content managers, allowing them to directly interact with their website content through familiar tools like forms, image uploading, and toolbars for formatting content. Not being able to make direct changes to basic content can indicate that your platform is too old,

Not being in control of a tool that occupies the center of your digital strategy is the biggest sign of a poor platform fit.

complex, or just not the right fit for your team. Despite how custom or complex your website is, you should be able to manage it directly.

⟨🔧⟩ We Haven't Maintained Our Website Platform in Years

Anything created online is essentially built on a foundation of sand—it won't withstand the incoming tide of new technology. This goes for website platform technology as well. Most CMS require periodic maintenance to keep them current and secure. They also require more significant updates every 3-5 years as new, major releases come out.

For example, Drupal is currently on major version release 8, but there have been over 35 minor releases in the last 18 months since it came out that patch security issues, fix bugs, and generally improve and stabilize the platform. In addition, major updates for version 9 are now well underway. Typically a major update that requires a migration can be expected every 4-5 years.

So if you haven't updated or actively maintained your website within the last 5 years your platform could be compiling serious security, functionality, or user issues. The longer you put off updating your website, the larger your technical debt becomes.

In a well-known case, Equifax was months behind in its security patching and compromised the information of 30% of Americans. Most likely your public-facing content doesn't pose as much of a security risk, however it's very important to maintain your systems.

It might be possible that your platform has become a legacy system without you noticing. A legacy system is a CMS that's no longer being supported, and if your website platform isn't being maintained frequently, it's difficult to catch. For example, in Drupal the core team will only support the current two versions, which span about 10 years. They currently support Drupal 7 and 8 with security releases. If your site is still running Drupal 6, you're running on legacy code that can't be maintained, and is a security risk.

Or, more dramatically, we encountered a client whose CMS (MojoPortal) seemed to be running fine—but the developer of that CMS had recently posted to the blog that he was going to completely stop supporting or working on the platform. That had happened 18 months prior, but isn't the type of communication that anyone was tracking.

The Wrong Reason to Choose a Website Platform

At the beginning of this whitepaper, we mentioned that choosing the right website platform is a more complex decision than most folks realize. Where website platforms differ most, are in aspects that can't be seen with just a glance.

Here are a few of the most common—and incorrect—reasons businesses choose a specific platform.

" Our competitors are all on Wordpress."

Understandably, part of doing business is keeping one eye on your competitors. But website platform technology is one aspect where this may not hold true. Your team's workflow, the stack of tools you rely on, and your specific web strategy are all unique to your business, and the more your platform aligns to those factors, the more of a supportive tool it will be.

" Someone on our team is really familiar with Adobe Experience Manager."

When approaching the choice of platform, most folks focus on usability—how easy it will be to manage. This is an important consideration, but it shouldn't be the only consideration, or (depending on your business objectives) even the most important one. Most website platforms offer an admin experience that's quite easy to navigate, and shouldn't be considered a distinguishing factor.

" We were marketed to by Sitecore."

When most platforms seem to be really similar—at least on the surface—the most distinguishing aspect between them may be how they're marketed. Like approaching endless stacked shelves of shampoo at the supermarket, the marketing and the packaging are key to their sales. We recommend that you take advice from agnostic authorities with cross-platform experience—people in your network that you trust—and that you do your own independent research before making your decision.

" We really wanted Wordpress's on-page edit feature."

We've often seen a business choose a website platform for a specific feature. But in reality, this feature might not be as unique to their chosen website platform as they had originally thought.

Currently, most CMS platforms are at parity and offer the same features. Determining what the differences are between platforms, and which is the best for your website can be a difficult decision, and often completely subjective or based on experiences of the team.

Businesses who make their decisions based off the reasons above will find that they may face more struggles with website management than they had expected to. And, unfortunately, once a decision has been made it will take a lot of time, money, and resources to switch platforms.

Don't limit your platform decision criteria to features, try to pursue overall technical capabilities. Feature sets are like a thin layer of topsoil, the platform's true, distinguishing technology—if it's open-source, modular, well-supported—determine growth strategy, ongoing maintenance, integration capabilities, and security, and those aspects are hidden deeper.
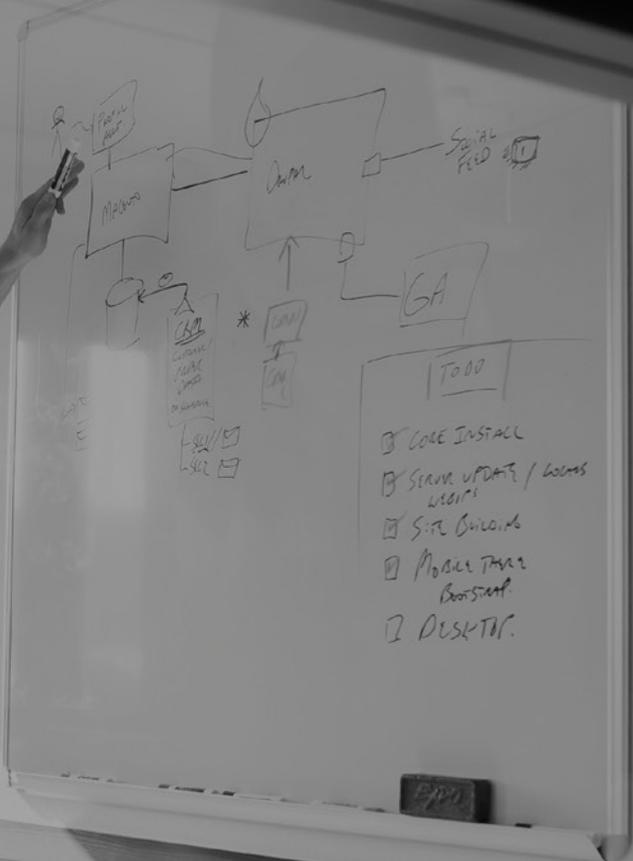
Key Criteria to Make Your Web Platform Decision

When we sit down with our clients, we don't start the discussion by talking about website platforms. Instead, we talk extensively about their business. We run their scenario, asking questions about their staff, their experience levels, what tools they're used to, what their estimated growth looks like and what they can afford. At that point, we then find the platform that fits their business case.

Here are the factors we consider, when evaluating platforms for our clients.

Cost

Cost is always an important consideration, everyone operates with a budget, and Total Cost of Ownership for platforms vary widely. As you approach different website platforms, you want to adopt an overarching perspective when considering the cost of your website. Beyond the initial build or commercial license expenditures at the beginning of your project, you should also consider how much of your budget will need to go towards ongoing maintenance and support, as well as what kind of team you'll need to manage your website strategy.

We recommend you choose the most cost efficient option, finding a balance between budget and quality. Considering how expensive it can be to switch platforms later on, this is not a decision you want to make based on price alone.

The Complexity of Your Content Marketing or Publishing

Before choosing your website platform, be sure to have an editorial and content strategy defined, so you know what your content is and *likely will be*. Whether you're starting off with a complex content strategy—pursuing dynamic pages, embedded videos, a custom user experience—or a simpler content strategy— updating an onsite blog, featuring company news—the website platform you choose should support your current content strategy and provide the capability for creating new types of content in the future.

You want to have a platform that can support content updates, that allows you to create new pages, or a microsite for a unique campaign.

📢 What Your Website Needs to Talk To

What other tools or systems are in place that your platform will need to be integrated with? Do you want to pass information from your public-facing website to your Salesforce CRM, Marketo email marketing platform, Google analytics, event systems, online stores, registration platforms, personalization tools, or pass activity to a corporate ERP system?

It's likely you already have a stack of tools in place. Take a moment to build your Martech Stack map, so you can select a CMS platform that will fit in well with all of your other tools. This is quite often the most expensive development line item for new projects. The ideal website platform for your business is one that fits to your strategy, and doesn't force you to change your work process or abandon other tech.

Scalability

You need a website platform that grows with your business—that's scalable. The last thing you want is to face a tech ceiling that forces you to find a new website platform once again. We recommend choosing a website platform that allows you to pursue new business or online strategies, where you own and have access to your code, where you own and control your database, and one that is continually being developed and supported by a company or organization with a large development team.

Open-source platforms provide the most flexibility, allowing your development team to directly access the source code of the platform. For you, this means the ability to create a custom user experience, faster design implementation, and custom systems integrations.

Security

Unfortunately, there is an unavoidable risk that comes with doing anything online. However, there are baseline practices that you can follow that will help protect your website's security.

We want you to have total control of the look and feel, customer experience, integrations, and flexibility. Platform security is an area you can't always control.

Pick a platform that has a committed security team, a large community of developers, a large customer installation base, a notification system that is easy to monitor, and set up a maintenance program for patching and support. Plan to put a Web Application Firewall (Cloudflare or Sucuri) in front of your site. Restrict admin panel access, ideally to only corporate IP addresses. In addition, be sure you are using a fully managed hosting provider who is committed to keeping the underlying servers and web systems up-to-date and patched.

Ease of Management

It's important that you feel comfortable working in and making content updates in your new platform. You, or people on your team, will be working in the system every day, and updating your content shouldn't be more difficult than managing your Facebook or LinkedIn profile page. We recommend searching out a demo version of the platform you're considering and managing the controls for yourself.

You want a platform that is capable of handling complex functions, but that complexity shouldn't extend to the editor's experience working in the platform, you should have control of your own digital strategies.

Support

When evaluating platforms, consider the size of their developer community. Some platforms, especially open-source platforms, have massive online communities of developers that freely contribute to the platform's code. This means more implementations, better security, and an up-to-date platform, but it also means a wider pool from which you can find support.

Rather than building your own custom website within Ruby on Rails, or building on an outdated or obscure platform, a more widely known platform means that you have more freedom with developer resources, and won't find yourself chained to a developer or development team that doesn't work well with you.

Is There a Best Platform?

While there may not be one website platform that is universally the best option for all businesses, there is a platform that is the best option for your business, specifically. Like any web tool, the one that serves your business the best is the one that most aligns with your overall strategy.

For each business, this looks entirely different. We're a Drupal shop, but over the years we've encountered clients who we think would find more success with a simple Wordpress website, or vice versa, have over-coded their Wordpress website when they would've had a much simpler time with a more complex Drupal website.

In the search for the best platform for your business, the best thing you can do is first evaluate your own business needs. Do you have tools that your website platform needs to be able to interact with in specific ways? What do your development resources look like? What kind of team will work and live within your platform every day? What do you want your website platform to be able to do a year from now? Two years? First defining what you need your website to be will help you determine which platforms aren't a good match.

In the next section, we've charted out the factors that we use to evaluate website platforms, breaking down their offerings to help you determine which platform is the best for your business.

Enterprise Capable Platforms

Small-Business / SaaS Platforms

CMS						
Platform	**Type**	**Market Share**	**Verticals (Top 3)**	**Annual Licensing Cost***	**License**	**Dev Skill Required**
Drupal	Enterprise	4.80%	Business, Education, Publishing	None	Open-Source	Moderate to Expert
AEM (Adobe Experience Manager)	Enterprise	1.20%	Business, Technology, Education	$$$$	Proprietary	Novice to Expert
Sitecore	Enterprise	0.80%	Business, Health, Education	$$$$	Proprietary	Moderate to Expert
Sharepoint	Enterprise	0.30%	Education, Business, Government	$$	Proprietary	Novice to Expert
Custom Built	Enterprise	< 36%	Business, Technology, Entertainment	None	Proprietary	Expert
Expression Engine	Enterprise	0.40%	Business, Travel, Education	$	Proprietary	Novice to Expert

Small-Business / SaaS Platforms						
Craft	SMB	0.10%	Business, Technology, Social	$	Proprietary	Moderate to Expert
Square Space	SMB	1.40%	Business, Entertainment, Social	$	Proprietary	Novice
Wordpress	Enterprise/ SMB	59.50%	Business, Technology, Entertainment	None/$	Open-Source	Novice to Expert
Joomla!	Enterprise/ SMB	6.80%	Business, Education, Technology	None	Open-Source	Moderate to Expert

* Estimates, Not Including Hosting Costs

CMS					
Platform	Code Base	Martech Integration Capability	Security Team	Admin Simplicity	Development Community Size
Drupal	PHP (Symfony Framework)	Custom Dev/ API	Dedicated Team	Depends on customization *	Huge
(AEM) Adobe Experience Manager	API	Plug-ins/API	Provides Documentation	Good	Internal
Sitecore	.NET / API	Plug-ins/API	Provides Documentation	Good	Internal
Sharepoint	.NET	API	Provides Documentation	Good	Med
Custom Built	ASP/.NET most common	Custom	None	Depends on customization	Internal
Expression Engine	PHP (Code Ignightor Framework)	Custom	Available Team	Good	Med
Magnolia	Java	Modules	Provides Documentation	Good, slight learning curve	Large
Episerver	.NET	API	Available Team	Good	Med

Small-Business / SaaS Platforms					
Craft	PHP (Yii Framework)	Plug-ins	Dedicated Team	Good	Small
Square Space	Java / API	Plug-ins	Available Team	Very Simple	Small
Wordpress	PHP (no Framework)	Plug-ins / Custom Dev	Dedicated Team	Very Simple	Huge
Joomla!	PHP (no Framework)	API	Dedicated Team	Good	Large

* Is known for having a steep learning curve
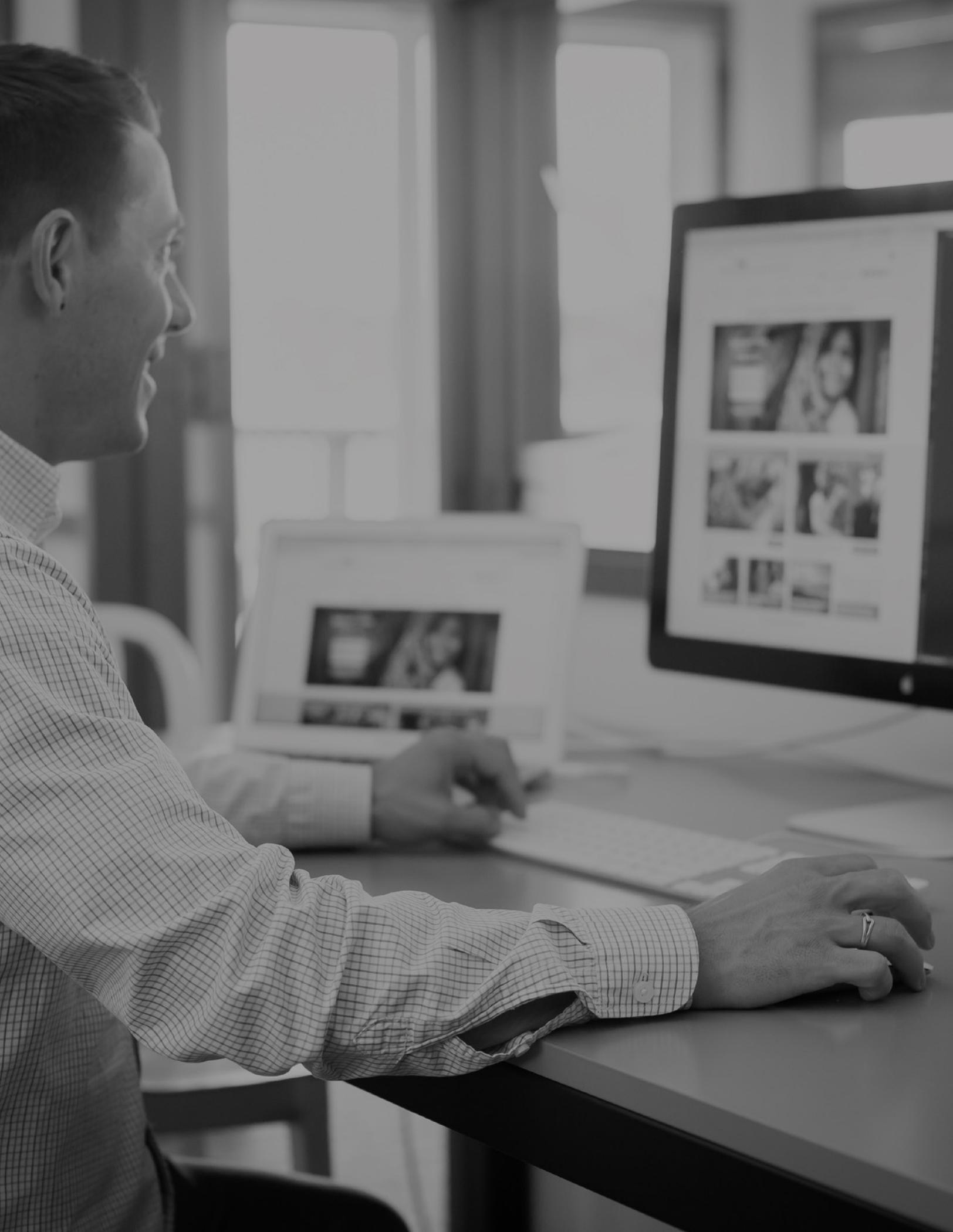
About Bear Group

Bear Group specializes in building custom websites with Drupal CMS and Magento eCommerce platforms. Each of our developers are open-source experts and veterans of both platforms. We're fortunate to use our expertise to back the ambitious digital strategies of industry leaders.

Initially founded in 2007, Bear Group has spent the last decade partnering with a long list of industry experts. From our office along the shore of Lake Union, we've scoped hundreds of projects and launched thousands of successful deployments.

We are a team. Each member of Bear Group is passionately involved in their field. We take pride in what we do and greatly enjoy bringing life to the digital strategies of our clients and easing pain points with quality code.

We always look forward to engaging with new clients. Please feel free to connect with us anytime for a free consultation at:
https://www. beargroup.com/contact

Best of luck in your platform decision! The Bear Group

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