Why the age of large group website builds could be over

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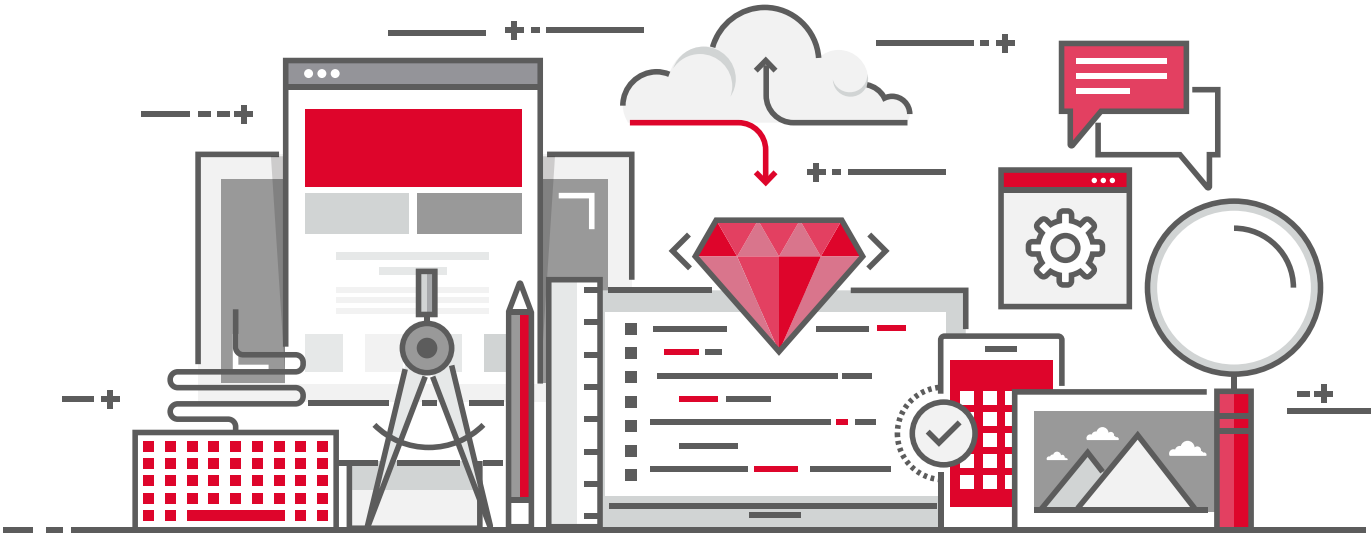
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It's not as unlikely as it may sound. In fact, in B2B marketing, it's common for a website to need to communicate with several different audiences, or markets, at the same time.

The traditional digital response to this is to have one large website that tries to fulfil all these needs within one platform. But in attempting to be all things to all men, there are inevitably compromises. The risk is that you end up 'averaging out' the specific needs and expectations of your different audiences, and you end up with a website that does a lot of things 'averagely', without really nailing any of them.

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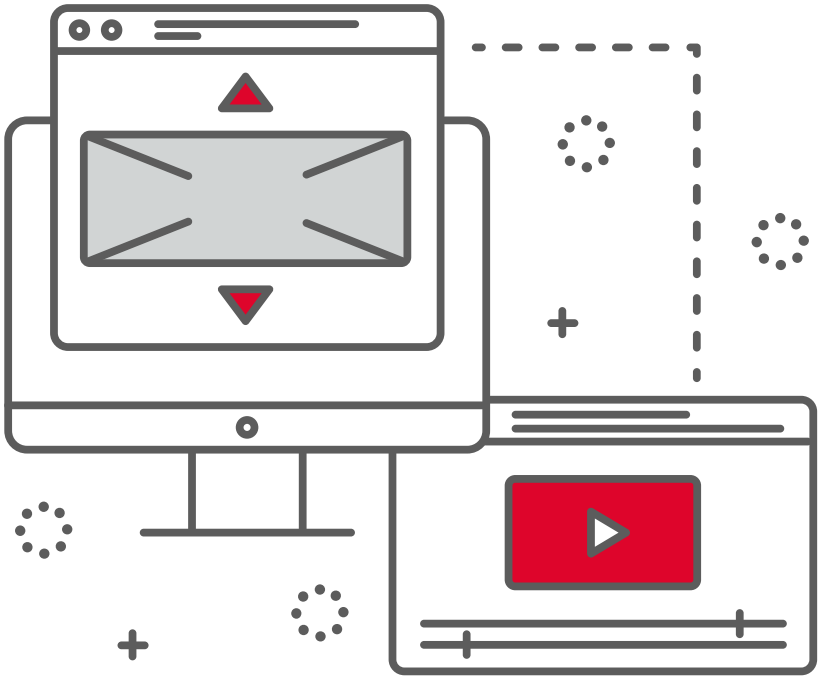
In this situation, the main website will tend to be an overarching group site that covers all the business's areas of work. It will then quickly direct users towards products that fulfil their specific needs.

The products themselves will often be squeezed into page designs or templates that meet the needs of the overarching website, but which may not suit those particular products themselves, or the needs of their specific audience.

There is an inevitable tension between the needs of the group and its separate divisions. The divisions want a degree of control over their specific website content, so they can tailor their marketing effectively for their targeted audiences.

But the group needs to retain the ability to oversee branding, security and consistency across divisions.

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What's the alternative?

In the ideal scenario, every page/area of the website would have a single audience, single responsibility or a single reason to change.

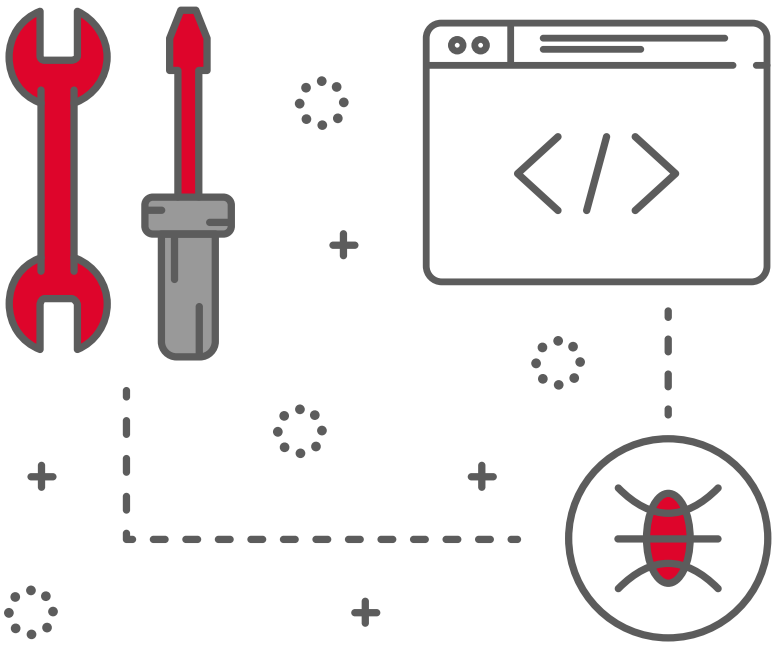
This makes it clear to the audience what their action should be, clear to the administrator what information they should be trying to get across, and clear to the search engines what the page is focused on.

For instance, the purpose of the group site is to provide information about the group as a whole, providing an overview of what it does and its achievements, reassuring the visitor that it is an organisation they can do business with (or work for). It will show how the group gives strength and values to its divisions.

Each of the divisions would then have its own separate area within the group site. These could be presented as separate sites, although from an admin point of view, they are all part of the same site for granting control. The purpose of these sub-sites is to increase the turnover of that division by delivering targeted product information, education and aftersales support tailored to that audience's specific needs.

The user feels engaged by the rich content and clear messaging. The navigation adapts as the user moves through the website to be relevant, clear and simple at all times.

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Taking the modular approach

Traditionally, an agency would recommend a single platform to handle everything, all in one place and all in the same way.

But this approach is becoming increasingly outdated for managing large businesses in multiple markets across the digital environment.

Trying to use a single platform or solution to handle all the marketing and business needs of the group and its divisions, audience and market routes, is a classic case of one size not fitting all. As outlined above, as the needs and priorities of the different divisions in the group evolve, the restrictions of a single platform will constrain their differing needs.

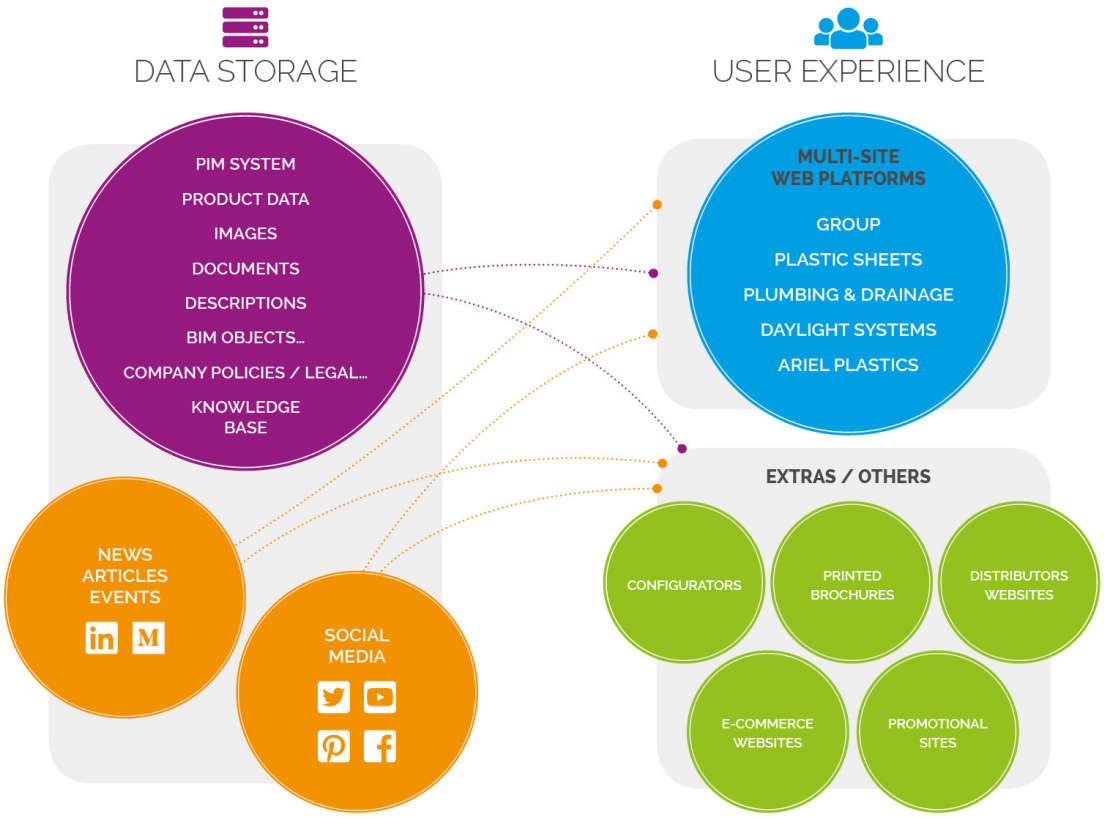
Instead, an alternative approach is to put together a modular ecosystem of solutions using 'best of breed' technologies that are best suited for each task or goal. Each solution can be seamlessly integrated, ensuring single points of administration and a smooth, intuitive experience for the user.

Technology today allows us to create a unified user experience that meets the needs of both the group and its divisions, but which is built on several different platforms and solutions, each providing an optimal solution for the specific role they fulfil.

Clicking from the main group website to a divisional section is a simple click. As far as the user is concerned, all that happens is the page changes. Underneath the hood, however, the user has switched to another platform that is more focused on the goals of that division's audience.

It could be a switch to an eCommerce platform, with functionality that is purely focused on selling. Perhaps a careers and recruitment platform that aims to attract new staff, retain current employees and offer career progression and training advice. Or maybe a brochure-style CMS platform for users searching for group information.

An outline modular architecture might look something like this:



More flexibility

The beauty of this kind of approach is that it could be implemented gradually, with the existing web ecosystem re-engineered in stages into a modern website solution with the flexibility to grow and change with business and divisional needs.

The modular approach allows us to take time to recreate assets and content where required for some parts of the site, but still release other phases of the project as they become ready, getting some items to market sooner. It also provides the flexibility to retain existing systems and assets if they are still useful.

There are a host of other benefits in not going for one big hit. Like a new housing estate development that releases batches of housing in stages, the unreleased phases can be adapted based on real world experience, before money is wasted on building them. And the phases that are released sooner can start earning money sooner – helping to finance the rest of the project.

The biggest benefit, though, is that by making the whole ecosystem flexible in the long term, big, expensive rebuilds become a thing of the past. On a single platform, you end up with a solution that does everything OK, but not great.

They are expensive to maintain and even more expensive to replace. It's far better to use a modular approach that combines best of breed platforms that excel in what they do, and that can be removed, switched out or upgraded quickly and inexpensively, without impacting the rest of the site.

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