

# Protecting Natural Resources Through Online Communities



## Challenges

- Confusing and frustrating user experience
- Extensive PHP demands consumed resources
- Site innovations were sidelined
- Membership involvement was put at risk

## Acquia Drupal Helps Build Grassroots Involvement

With over 20 years in the non-profit sector, River Network represents a nationwide effort to protect rivers and freshwater resources. River Network serves multiple audiences – its Partner organizations, who are committed to protecting rivers and watersheds; donors, who provide important resources; and citizens who seek information about freshwater issues in their communities. River Network has evolved its marketing and relationship building tools to use the internet as an effective vehicle for growing a grassroots community that brings together these audiences.

### Managing the Online Experience

As part of River Network's mission to help people understand, protect and restore rivers and their watersheds, River Network relies on a comprehensive web presence at Rivernetwork.org to provide information, resources and training materials to community-based organizations; offer a networking platform for a wide group of users to access and share information; and showcase issues, challenges and success stories in order to attract financial support.

As online membership and participation increased, it created a series of logistical problems. The original incarnation of the site was based in Cold Fusion, and was upgraded to a custom PHP architecture. The upgrade path was flawed, leading to a confusing maze of content and broken links. The result was a frustrating user experience. Because River Network is a non-profit organization that relies on the financial and volunteer support of interested and committed parties, it was imperative that the online experience be made as easy (and enjoyable) as possible.

In addition, the updating of the site was a manually intensive process, requiring extensive HTML and PHP expertise – causing a support bottleneck for the site. The demands of repairing and supporting the site were creating a roadblock to introducing new content as well as new features and innovations, which severely dampened the upkeep of Rivernetwork.org.

## The Need for CMS

Like many organizations that power an online community, River Network came to the realization that they would need to move from a manually supported custom solution to a true Content Management System (CMS). Using a CMS would allow features to be added as components, and provide support interfaces for River Network that didn't require extensive programming expertise. A CMS would make new features available that were beyond the current scope of River Network.

## Drupal Powered CMS

River Network considered a series of options for a CMS, but ultimately selected Drupal as their CMS platform of choice. According to Stephen Twelker, River Network's Office Manager and a member of the web development team, the choice to move to Drupal was based on the active community of users and developers around Drupal and the wealth of resources already available. "We wanted to use an open source system and had already begun creating new sub-sites in Drupal. We looked at our options, decided to bring the entire site over into Drupal, and have never looked back. It's been the right choice for us," said Stephen.

Once River Network chose Drupal as their CMS platform of choice, they set about hiring a site designer and developer. Jeffrey Dalton Design, a website design/development company with extensive knowledge of Drupal, was the missing link. Jeffrey emphasized the user experience as integral to building a successful site, and was able to guide River Network through the process of creating a site that incorporated the newest technologies while remaining accessible to a wide swath of users.

## Acquia Drupal

With the right CMS solution in hand, River Network wanted to put the best foot forward in launching a new online experience that wouldn't involve taking any steps backwards. Initial internal testing was revealing that there was difficulty in trying to retrofit Drupal functionality into existing PHP Smarty templates. Jeffrey Dalton, an Acquia Silver Partner himself, recommended that River Network look to Acquia to ensure their Drupal implementation was a success.

A commercial open source software company vested in Drupal, Acquia offered River Network two key advantages. First, Acquia could provide a turnkey set of utilities designed to fast track implementation with assurance in the quality and future maintenance of its modules. Second, Acquia could offer their Acquia Support Network, a subscription-based program that would ensure River Network's continued use of Acquia Drupal would be trouble-free. It was clear to River Network that Acquia would be key to their Drupal success.

## The Implementation Process

A comprehensive, ground-up rebuild strategy was planned in the summer of 2008, including assembling the development team necessary to fast-track the process. Substantial development work started October 1<sup>st</sup> with a 5-person web team responsible for getting the site infrastructure complete before the New Year. With effective teamwork, the design experience of Jeffrey Dalton and the Acquia Drupal package at their disposal, the core shell of the new Rivernetwork.org site was ready before Christmas. In February, the new site went live. River Network acknowledges that the actual implementation was easier than the pre-planning, marketing analysis and decision making process that preceded it.

## Rivernetwork.org Today

The current Rivernetwork.org site now offers a seamless content experience for its audience of Partners, donors and the general public. Through Acquia Drupal, River Network uses an easy-to-manage set of user and group profiles. These profiles allow different user types varying levels of access, from content consumption to contribution.

For River Network, these easily administered groups means that content generated by all staff members—regardless of technological savvy—has increased, without any risk of accidental damage being done to the underlying Drupal technology. Staff members access a template-driven system for creating rich content, which improves the experience for content consumers.

Because Rivernetwork.org incorporates several subsites, Drupal's ability to manage those sites and globally extend themes and features has been a crucial advantage. The support team no longer has to reactively triage selected sites and pages, but can administer the group of sites holistically.

The end result is a robust online experience that brings donors, partners and volunteers together. River Network is able to easily administer the site, powered by Acquia Drupal, and allows Partners to easily add and manage content without having to be their own web masters. River Network's own support staff is empowered to more easily control the look and feel of the site, and the organization saves considerable funds by not having to staff CSS and HTML gurus.

## Looking Forward

Pleased with their renovated online presence, River Network is looking ahead to new ways they can improve their online community and add additional channels to create and share information. River Network has already launched two site blogs, and is in the process of identifying new social networking and communication opportunities.

River Network understands that getting donors and volunteers involved is dependent on providing a wealth of compelling factual information as well as how-to resources.

## Benefits

- Rivernetwork.org is easily administered without custom coding
- Extended family of sites can be centrally managed
- Partners are given greater autonomy to create and share content
- Important information is more visible and accessible
- Membership satisfaction has been increased
- Web administrators are free to pursue future enhancements



The audience must understand the importance, locally and nationally, of protecting rivers and watersheds and how to go about achieving this success. Once projects have been funded, it is paramount that the results of those endeavors are made visible, and the benefits clear. Thanks to Acquia Drupal and its Silver Partner developers like Jeffrey Dalton, River Network is moving forward with the best online resources for achieving these goals.

## About Jeffrey Dalton Design

Jeffrey Dalton Design provides consulting services including UX design, information architecture, site planning, module selection, Drupal installation, configuration, graphic and UI design, custom theme design/creation/installation, and end client Drupal training. Jeffrey Dalton Design is a registered Acquia Silver Partner.

## About River Network

River Network's mission is to *help people understand, protect and restore rivers and their watersheds*. Since our founding in 1988, River Network has spawned an entire grassroots movement focused on better stewardship of our "home waters" and their watersheds. We firmly believe that local people, working locally, are ultimately the best hope for creating a healthy environment. To that end, we focus all of our resources on helping existing local "Partner" organizations become stronger and more effective, and helping new organizations develop where there are none. The number of River Network Partner groups rose from zero to 220 in our first decade. Today, they number nearly 700.

## About Acquia

Acquia is a commercial open source software company. We provide a valuable set of software and network services for the popular Drupal open source social publishing system. At Acquia, we maximize the potential of Drupal-powered solutions through our annual subscriptions for software and services. For more information about how Acquia can transform your community driven web investments, contact Acquia Sales at [sales@acquia.com](mailto:sales@acquia.com), 888-9-ACQUIA or +1-978-296-5250.