

Acquia

# ***MAKING THE RIGHT MULTISITE DECISION***

Using a 'Site Factory' Platform to Reduce  
Cost, Improve Speed and Ensure Security





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# INTRODUCTION

**Gone are the days when organizations could get by with a single site.**

The availability of omnichannel opportunities and evolving consumer behavior has pressured organizations to expand their digital presence (i.e. websites).

This explosion in site creation has overwhelmed organizations, leaving them with a hodgepodge of many different platforms, incompatible technologies and support teams.

All of which lead to slower time to market, increased cost and a disjointed online experience for the public.

These quickly multiplying digital properties range from externally facing corporate websites, microsites, and campaign sites to internally facing wikis, forums, and intranets.

Most often these websites are built and managed on different web content management systems and built on disparate technology stacks operated by teams with varying technical skills.

**The need for multi-region sites is most common in organizations that have many distinct brands and products. Building regional sites and catering to different audiences such as affiliates, dealers, agents, and franchises adds to the count.**



Industries that require multiple websites include (but aren't limited to):

**HIGHER EDUCATION**


**MEDIA,  
ENTERTAINMENT AND  
PUBLISHING (MEP)**

**PUBLIC SECTOR /  
GOVERNMENT**

**CONSUMER PACKAGED  
GOODS (CPG)**

**NON-GOVERNMENTAL  
ORGANIZATIONS (NGO)**



A photograph of three business professionals in a meeting. A woman with long dark hair, wearing a black sleeveless top, is seated at a dark wooden table and looking towards a man. The man, with short dark hair and a white button-down shirt, is seated across from her, looking at a laptop. A third person, a man with short grey hair wearing a light blue shirt, is seated in the foreground with his back to the camera, looking towards the other two. The table has a laptop, two coffee cups, and some papers. The background is a red brick wall and a window showing greenery outside. A large blue and orange abstract graphic is in the top right corner.

**Gone are the days  
when organizations  
could get by with a  
single site.**

The challenge for all of these organizations is how best to govern their growing web footprint on a platform that is highly secure, reduces cost, and improves time to launch. In order to determine if a multisite solution is right for all, or a portion of, your many sites, you have to assess a number of factors.

The process starts with understanding the benefits of a multisite platform; followed by determining which of your sites can reside successfully on a multisite platform.



# ***BENEFITS OF A MULTISITE PLATFORM***

**The key benefit of a multisite platform is the economics of governing and operating many sites that share a common range of technical functionality.**

Some sites will require rapidly evolving functions and constant technical development, and as such would not be able to leverage the benefits and simplicity of a common site architecture.

However, if the majority of your sites could work within a templated format, and utilize a common site architecture and set of functions, then a multisite platform would be worth considering as you expand your digital strategy.

## Some of the key benefits of using a multisite platform include:

### GOVERNANCE

For any organization with multiple sites, governance can be a challenge and a major pain point. Governance refers to how an organization will manage its sites, as well as its people and processes in the site production process.

With multisite, establishing governance needs to occur before you start building and deploying sites, otherwise it can very quickly become an organizational nightmare. This is where utilizing a multisite platform becomes extremely helpful.

A unified platform provides a single dashboard to manage the creation and deployment of websites, including setting code standards to maintain consistency across sites and aid in overall code management. Because of the central codebase, any new modules that are deployed to the sites are also centrally governed.

Platforms allow roles and permissions to be defined for better workflow and risk management.



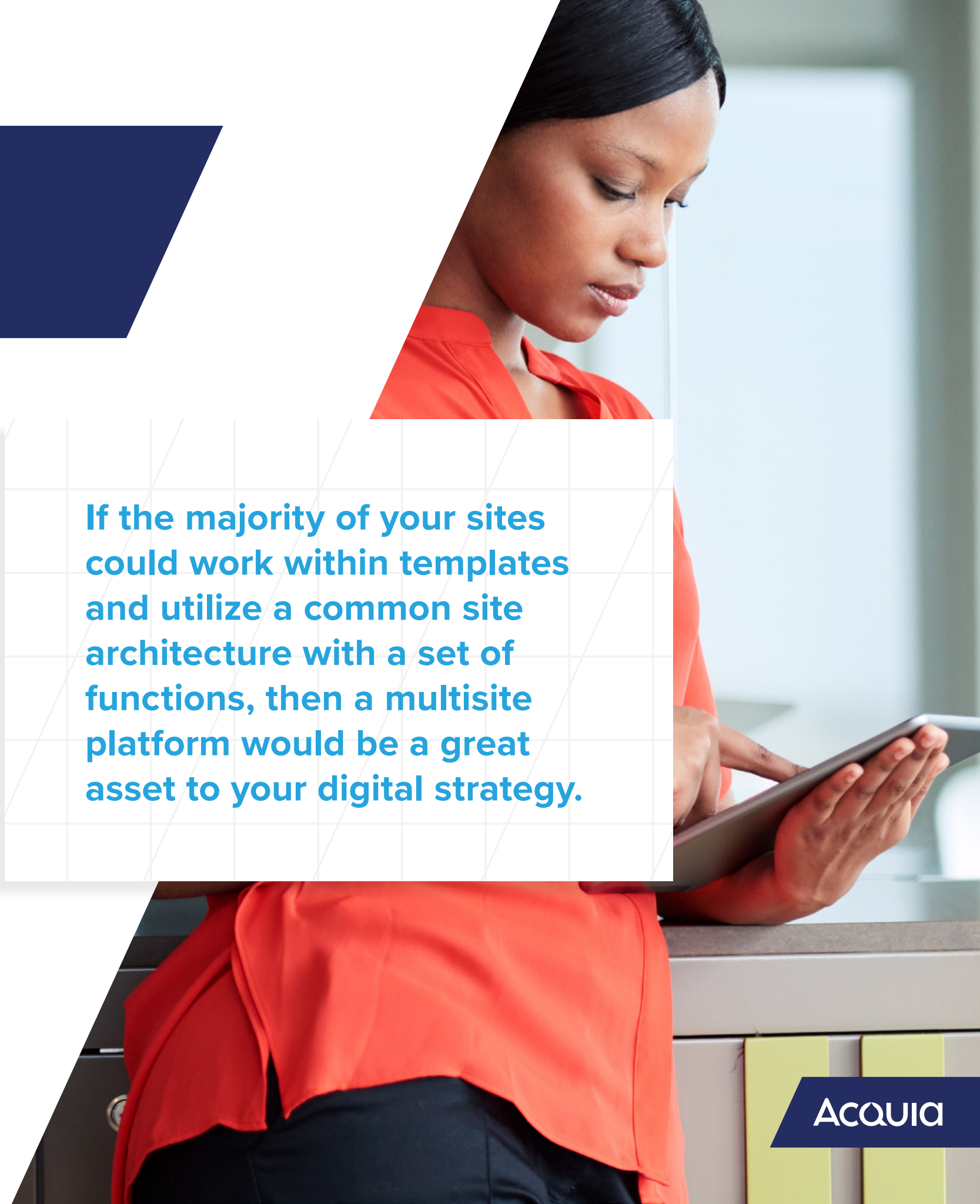




For example, the marketing team may have a major campaign coming up and want to build a site for it. With a multisite platform, marketing can spin up a new campaign site with just the click of a button.

They'd also be able to gain access to all available templates or starter sites, and clone them without worrying about infrastructure or interfering with another department's sites.

This simplified process prevents marketers requesting IT every time a new site needs provisioning or updates/changes; all of which saves the organization time and resource as updates and maintenance can be performed with fewer technical resources and at a much faster pace.



**If the majority of your sites could work within templates and utilize a common site architecture with a set of functions, then a multisite platform would be a great asset to your digital strategy.**



## ***FASTER TIME TO MARKET***

The more platforms and WCMs you have to manage your digital properties, the more resources you need to maintain them. Because not all WCM systems are created equal, this can also mean that some of those resources are spending time supporting outdated technology rather than building and deploying new sites.

By using a multisite platform, you can consolidate your websites into one system that allows you to build reusable themes and templates, thus improving deployment time.

## ***LOWER COST***

Running multiple platforms is costly; there's no two ways about it. By using a multisite platform, you lower your costs by reducing duplication of effort and complexity.

This also saves on incurring cost from the resources dedicated to each platform as well as license fees and maintenance retainers associated with those platforms.

## ***IMPROVED SECURITY***

Different technologies have different levels of security and different security features. When you're using multiple CMS platforms, this lack of consistency opens you up to risk.

Each content management system will require different bug fixes, security scans or updates, making it challenging for your organization to minimize risk across the board and thus leaving you vulnerable.

With a unified multisite platform, all site updates and maintenance can be done once to the codebase and all sites within the platform will be updated automatically, reducing error-prone manual, site by site updates.



## BRAND CONSISTENCY

The challenge of maintaining brand consistency becomes even more difficult when your digital properties are all running on different systems with potentially different features, capabilities, and design.

By using a single multisite platform, you can create templates that can be as flexible or as locked down as you want.

With a single dashboard to manage all of your websites, you also can control permissions, ensuring that the only the proper stakeholders have access to their templates and sites, thus preventing any accidental or unwanted changes.

## GOVERNANCE AND CONTROL

When all of your websites are on disparate, incompatible CMS platforms, not only do you have to remember multiple logins, you have no fast or easy way to access all of your sites at once.

This means you lack visibility and control over your organization's websites, and thus digital strategy, which is dangerous. If you are an organization that cares especially

about brand, consistency, and user experience, without full the ability to govern and manage your sites at scale, achieve those three things will be next to impossible.

With a unified platform, you gain full visibility, access, and control of your sites. Governance is made possible, which ultimately leads to better site experiences for your audience.

**A common site architecture allows new modules to be added, or existing modules to be updated or any changes you want to make across your sites to take place.**



# ***HOW TO USE A MULTISITE PLATFORM EFFECTIVELY***

**There is one key component to a multisite platform that must be in place before you can start building and deploying sites: your codebase.**

This is how you will leverage a common site architecture across your sites. Each of the sites hosted on the multisite platform will utilize the available functionality appropriate to that site. By defining and maintaining that superset of functionality, the platform can provide great efficiencies.

A common site architecture allows new modules to be added, or existing modules to be updated or any changes you want to make across your sites to take place. This not only saves time during the build process but also when launching new sites.

The next step is to build your theme library. Themes help the site builder change the look and feel of a website without changing the underlying code. After your themes have been created, you can then start building your templates. These template sites are what you will use to spin out new sites quickly.

# ***CLONES VS. SNOWFLAKES***

## ***WHAT TYPE OF SITES DO YOU NEED?***

The key to effectively using a multisite platform is creating a template that will meet the needs of all of the sites you intend to migrate to your platform.

It's crucial to add all the features and functionality you need before the sites are deployed; any additional module or feature you add to the

template or starter site will affect all of your sites.

Adding new functionality to accommodate one site on a multisite platform after deployment creates the need for extensive testing. This ensure the new functionality will not conflict with, or break, any of the existing technology and sites.





Typically,  
businesses  
taking a platform  
approach to  
multisite will run  
into these four  
scenarios:

## 1. CLONES

Clones refer to sites that have the same look and feel with only minor changes to branding and content. These work particularly well for regional or product sites, where a template can be set and then deployed many times over without additional tooling.

What they lack in customization — there is no theming or layout changes for individual sites — they make up for in cost savings and time to market.

Another thing to be mindful of with clone sites is specific regional, regulatory or business sub-division

requirements. For example, if you are a pharmaceutical company looking to deploy a number of global sites, you need to factor in that what you can show on your product's websites will differ from country to country, depending on the regulations. In this case, you can create one for the US that use a different template than, for example, Europe.

You can then spin up your US sites under one template and all your European sites from the other as long as all the sites under those themes utilize the common functionality available.





## 2. LOOK AND FEEL CHANGES

While the sites can draw from a shared set of functions, they often require their own unique look and feel. In this case, a multisite platform is still the best approach. This is where the theme library comes in.

A theme library refers to a repository of set design elements including colors, graphics and styles that can be applied to different sites to change the appearance. Each site that is spun up from a template can then select its own theme from the library. The template will ensure that the features, modules and code remain consistent underneath the look and feel.

As long as you design your themes to be flexible and varied enough, any site you create using themes from your library can be as unique as you'd like.

The main consideration here is the same as with any code; front end development requires regression testing, even if you're using a theme. [Regression testing](#) refers to a type of testing used to detect bugs or breaks when new enhancements, patches or configuration changes are made to the basic template. Basic upkeep and validation are needed before launch but this type of site still leads to cost savings.



### 3. FEATURE FLEXIBLE

Feature flexible sites require special care and consideration. These sites, which also utilize the multisite platform, are more complex. This scenario might occur when a site owner has external creative and/or development partners such as a digital agency, making governance extremely important. Governance is required to ensure the development partners are enabled, governed and sites are then audited when returned for deployment.

Feature flexible sites require various development tools to manage, automate, test, and audit new functionality. This is a typical approach that most enterprises adopt when they have a large volume of well-funded, individual brand sites to support. Feature flexible sites require a deeper level of change management and communication for development partners who are working on the platform as well.

Regression testing becomes an important step to ensure the new functionality does not impact the existing codebase. The best way to handle changes is to implement automated testing to manage regression testing at a minimum.

### 4. SNOWFLAKES

Some sites require a custom experience that does not fall within the above options. The theming and back-end development is entirely unique to this particular site, often leading to these sites needing their own unique site architecture that may change frequently.


This type of a site with unique needs is often referred to as a snowflake. A snowflake will most likely be the main organization's website, where the major value of the digital business, such as ecommerce or customer support, will be housed.

While crucial to your business, snowflakes can be incredibly costly. The more powerful and complex a site, the more well-funded and resourced it needs to be as it will require a lot of dedicated time and technical talent to maintain and update.



<b>BASIC FEATURES WITH CREATIVE FREEDOM</b>	<b>NOT IMPORTANT</b>	<b>MODERATELY</b>	<b>VERY IMPORTANT</b>
Time to Market			✓
Reduce Per Site Cost			✓
Frequent New Feature Additions	✓		
Multisite Management		✓	
Large Feature Set	✓		
Unique Feature not Shared with Other Sites	✓		
<b>FEATURE FLEXIBLE</b>			
Time to Market		✓	
Reduce Per Site Cost		✓	
Frequent New Feature Additions		✓	
Multisite Management Tools			✓
Large Feature Set		✓	
Unique Feature not Shared with Other Sites	✓		
<b>SNOWFLAKE</b>			
Time to Market		✓	
Reduce Per Site Cost	✓		
Frequent New Feature Additions			✓
Multisite Management Tools	✓		
Large Feature Set			✓
Unique Feature not Shared with Other Sites			✓





A multisite platform will never be able to service 100 percent of an organization's digital properties.

The best course of action is to plan and develop a platform that can satisfy up to 90 percent of your web properties with similar features, thereby leaving the other 10 percent to be built as stand-alone sites or snowflakes.

This approach tends to offer the largest overall savings and benefits in managing the vast majority of an organization's websites.



Satisfy up to  
**90%**  
of your web properties



# ***DEVELOPERS VS. NON-TECHNICAL SITE BUILDERS***

When an organization makes the decision to use a multisite platform, that decision will impact two primary groups on a daily basis: developers and site builders.

## DEVELOPERS

When choosing a multisite platform, you need to consider how sites are built on it. Are open source tools like Drush, Git, etc. compatible? How will it affect staging? How will it affect testing? How does it handle deploying sites and updating code? A platform should make these things easier for developers.

One of the biggest advantages to a multisite platform is testing. Say you have 100 sites using a code base and you need to update a module. You may only have to perform the update in the one code base but you still have a 100 individual sites to test.

With a custom, do-it-yourself (DIY) solution, each site would need to be tested individually. A platform can help you update these sites simultaneously with minimal testing (depending on the

update) without breaking features on the sites, or incurring downtime. Each site also has its own database so that if something goes wrong on one, the others are not impacted.

**The right multisite platform will give non-technical site builders the ability to duplicate sites, add domains, manage the permissions, etc., without talking to a developer or someone from IT.**





## ***NON-TECHNICAL SITE BUILDERS***

Often, do-it-yourself multisite solutions may work for developers, but neglect the needs of site builders, marketers, and anyone else involved in the site design and creation process. Site builders need to be able to create, manage and control access to multiple sites.

The right multisite platform will give them the ability to duplicate sites, add domains, manage the permissions, etc., without talking to a developer or someone from IT. Traditional approaches require a code deployment with every new site.

Using a multisite platform empowers site builders and non-technical users like marketers by reducing their dependence on technical resources, allowing them to create and launch sites rapidly.



# **CITY OF LA: MULTISITE DONE CORRECTLY**

**Public sector is an industry where multisite capabilities are incredibly important.**

Each function needs the ability to effectively manage and maintain their websites. In 2014, the City of Los Angeles was in need of a better enterprise platform that was not only user friendly, but also flexible and cost effective. While reevaluating their CMS options, they also took a look at their overall digital strategy, including their approach to multisite management.



The City of LA has hundreds of field workers in LA that operate outside of their headquarters. In addition, IT was also decentralized, with more than 1,200 people across 40 different IT departments. In order to manage all of their sites effectively, they needed

a central backend where they could deploy core features and create templates to be utilized across the organization.

Since investing in a multisite platform, The City of LA has been able to

consolidate their website efforts without compromising the ability to spin off and control new websites as needed. This has saved the city money by improving efficiency while still maintaining flexibility needed for each city department.

**“We need to templatize the offering so a small group of people could power and support a large number of websites from the back end, while affording complete freedom and agility for practitioners on the front end.”**

Ted Ross, IT General Manager and Citywide CIO.



# CONCLUSION

**Launching multiple websites doesn't need to be a budget draining, time consuming experience.**

By adopting a unified platform for your technical and business needs, you take the hassle out of multisite management while reducing costs, and bring brand and design consistency to all of your sites.

In addition, it will reduce your time to market, making it easier to spin up new sites in a fraction of the time. Ultimately, a multisite solution will improve site governance, reduce costs, bring order to web production chaos, and provide a better experience for your audience.

**For more information on choosing the right multisite platform, please contact Mike Stankus at [mike.stankus@acquia.com](mailto:mike.stankus@acquia.com).**

**By adopting the right platform for your business needs, you take the hassle out of multisite management while reducing costs.**



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