



Mailchimp evolves their knowledge base and frees their teams with Contentful

Mailchimp helps small business grow with an all-in-one marketing platform that powers email campaigns, offers social media ads and integrates with over 300 apps. Launched as a side project in Atlanta in 2001 by two founders who grew up in entrepreneurial families, Mailchimp now counts 12 million customers worldwide who generate more than 2 million ecommerce orders daily.

ALL HAIL EMAIL

You probably know [Mailchimp](#) for their email marketing service. Chances are there's a message from one of their users in your inbox right now – they send out over one billion every day.

The Atlanta-based company does more than just email. What started as a side project for two founders almost 20 years ago has evolved into a hub for small businesses. In May 2019, Mailchimp launched an all-in-one marketing platform that offers services such as CRM tools, social media ads and paper postcards. They predict it will bring in \$700 million by year's end.

Having a strong knowledge base has always been important to the company. Most of Mailchimp's users are mom-and-pop operations that grapple with tasks like how to retarget ads on Facebook or accurately track customer leads. Mailchimp already had a help site that "shattered industry norms," with about 98.8 percent of self-serve help seekers finding what they were looking for, says Pamela Vickers, senior engineering manager at Mailchimp.

A robust in-app help search function also kept users on track.

Switching CMSes meant a lot could go wrong.

"It was scary. If we break that, we have to hire more support people. It would've been moving backwards," Vickers says. If the new site didn't work at least as well as the old one, support volume would go up.

GROWING PAINS

If IT years are like dog years, it's unsurprising that a startup founded in 2001 branched out so far that it needed a spreadsheet tracking hundreds of web properties. With the push to become a one-stop shop for everything from Simply Gum to Underclub, Mailchimp needed to consolidate their websites to create a unified digital presence.

It was also time for an organizational change. The static marketing site had its own dedicated engineering team because every time a comma needed deleting or an image needed updating, the engineers had to deploy that change.



Mailchimp teamed up with Work & Co to help them unite their marketing and knowledge base websites under one framework and one engineering staff. After an audit, they determined that they needed a more mature, nimble site that matched customer expectations. They also needed a way for the marketing team to generate content and make changes independently.

Internally, they were already familiar with Contentful. When Work & Co named Contentful as their top pick for Mailchimp, they were ready to roll.

SOFT LAUNCH, BIG IMPACT

Vickers' team decided on a soft launch for the knowledge base. As the brand and design work was underway for the marketing site, the engineering team tested out Plums, an interface they wrote to go between Contentful and the browser. Then they hit on a relatively simple design that only required about five templates for the whole knowledge base site. After rebuilding templates from the previous CMS, they launched through Contentful.

"It went really, really smoothly...to the point where I kept thinking that something should have gone wrong."

— Pamela Vickers,
Senior Engineering Manager, Mailchimp

"It went really, really smoothly," Vickers says, "to the point where I kept thinking that something should have gone wrong." Vickers says her team did find some edge cases around localization – the knowledge base is available in English, Spanish, Portuguese and French – but they were easy to fix.

The soft launch gave the team a shot of confidence when it came to flipping the switch for the marketing site. Patrick Young, digital production manager, – who also trained marketing and engineering teams on Contentful – calls the launch "seamless." He remembers there was a link that should have been going to a certain location, but wasn't. "We were able to fix it with a redirect really fast using Contentful," Young says. "It showed us how much of a game changer this CMS really was, because we were able to do things so fast."

RESULTS

With the marketing team able to directly edit content, the impact was immediate. Previously, it could take from 10-20 minutes to fix even a typo. "Now it's pretty much instant," Vickers says. Whoever spots an error is empowered to make the change with Contentful. "That's huge. But what's even bigger is that they can just create a brand new page without any help from engineering. Where we saw the absolute biggest change is just allowing the marketers the ability to market." Now the engineering team can watch the number of pages published roll by on a Slack channel, without needing to facilitate publication.

"I don't think very often about Contentful or how we interact with it," Vickers says. This frees her up to be strategic, not fretting over what might break the site. She can also focus more on the collaborative roadmap between marketing and engineering, rather than planning how to fulfill one-off requests.

Brett Belcher, on the other hand, thinks about Contentful a lot. Belcher, a knowledge base content engineer on a team of eight technical writers, says his "current job would not have been possible before Contentful. Most of my job revolves around using the Contentful API to pull, audit and manage our KB content."



They were working with “a really crummy, antique-y user interface” that made performing even simple tasks like a content audit a chore. To find all the knowledge base articles that mentioned the word ‘campaign,’ for example, they had to write a script to crawl every single user-accessible web page to look for that term within the HTML. “[Contentful] lets us do things that we couldn’t do before,” he says, adding that auditing is now a much simpler process. The big win, Belcher says, is that teams can use the management API not just to find these changes, but to make “broad sweeping wholesale changes to content in a fraction of the time.”

Previously, even a simple task like finding and adding an image to an article was a chore, says Technical Writer Rebecca Bowen. For starters, you might upload an image and then not be able to find it. Then the preview thumbnails were so

small they were hard to decipher. “It used to be a legitimate pain point and would take a long time to search for a little thing,” agrees fellow writer Sarah Fierman.

Furthermore, opening more than one tab at a time would often freeze or even crash a user’s computer, a risk writers ran when just trying to preview a story. With Contentful’s increased reliability and better navigation, writers can focus more on content. They can use metrics to see which articles users find most helpful and have cut about 60 by weeding out underperformers.

“It was a really nice transition,” says Fierman. “It was just like, ‘Okay, we’re training on this and we’re using this now’ and it barely caused a blip in our workflow.”

Considering Contentful? Mailchimp’s results after switching speak for themselves:

- Marketing team creates 10x more content
- Website time-to-deploy went from 10-20 minutes to instant
- Engineering team not bogged down by small requests
- Knowledge base site outperforms industry average