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Compass Guide to WCM, Q4 2013

Evaluation of Magnolia Software

By: Tony White



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Magnolia 5.0 Product Evaluation

By: Tony White

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ARS LOGICA POSITION

Magnolia produces an open source CMS platform characterized by extreme technical refinement, high scalability, excellent usability, and surprising feature-functional parity with the best of the commercial offerings on the market. With the highest “Flexibility” score and second highest “Usability” score in the *Compass Guide* scorecards, Magnolia is at or near the front of the pack in the two categories of most importance to technologists and business users, respectively. Magnolia’s best-of-breed product strategy will appeal to enterprises looking to integrate a Java-based CMS platform into heterogeneous IT environments without having to commit to a large suite of associated products.

NOTES & RESOURCES

Compass Guide Vendor Questionnaire

Some company and product information contained in this report was collected via Ars Logica’s 172-item Vendor Questionnaire. Vendor responses were independently verified through customer interviews, implementation monitoring, Ars Logica’s comprehensive knowledge base, and hands-on product testing.

Hands-On Product Testing

Ars Logica has conducted hands-on product testing of Magnolia CMS at the company’s headquarters in Basel, Switzerland. Remote testing of v. 5.0 was completed in September 2013.

Customer Interviews

Ars Logica interviewed users of every product covered in the Compass Guide, including Magnolia CMS 5.0.

Implementation Monitoring

Since the 1990s, Ars Logica founder Tony White has kept close tabs on ongoing WCM implementations. Some of this knowledge is represented in the Compass Guide reports.

No Vendor Influence

Ars Logica retains complete editorial control over the Compass Guides and receives no funding in their production.

Magnolia Vendor Overview

Founded in 1997, Magnolia is a Swiss-based CMS vendor that released its first product in 2003. From the beginning – and to an unusual degree – a clean, flexible, and scalable product architecture has been the primary concern in the development of the Magnolia platform. Although not as well-known in North America as in Europe, Magnolia produces a very technically sophisticated product and, as a result, has a marquee-rich client base. Developers express nearly unanimous enthusiasm for the technical side of the product, and business users report similar satisfaction with the new 5.0 user interface. The company has recently established a slight but firm foothold in North America, and it continues to gain marketshare in Europe.

Company Profile

Year founded: 1997
Headquarters: Basel, Switzerland
Employees (or FTE equivalents): 56
Geographies: Europe, North America
Revenue: \$6.8 million / CHF 6.2 million
Product types offered: CMS
Commercial or open source: Open source with enterprise support available
Strategic implementation partners: Aperto AG, NRG Edge, OpenMind, Tata, Tinext
Top competitors: Adobe, Hippo, OpenText, Oracle
Key vertical industries: Financial services, government, media & entertainment

Product Profile

Product name: Magnolia CMS
Version: 5.0
Next version release date: November 2013
Market segment: Enterprise
Average sales price (annual contract):
Community Edition: Free
Enterprise Standard: \$36,000 / CHF 32,000
Enterprise Edition: \$75,000 / CHF 68,000
Technology platform: Java
Key strengths: Flexible architecture, enterprise scalability, elegant user interface
Key limitations: Slight presence in North America, small partner/channel network compared to feature-functional peers
Highest-value use case: Departmental or enterprise deployment at customer with complex integration requirements and sufficient IT resources. Business users rate the product highly for ease-of-use.

Vendor History & Product Evolution

Founded in Basel, Switzerland in 1997, Magnolia Software began the development of what became its first product by providing customized professional services to a small but continuously-growing group of regional companies. From the beginning, Magnolia took an information architect's approach to software development, choosing the most discrete, flexible approach (this soon came to be known as "services-oriented architecture" or "SOA") at every turn. Because it had no legacy technologies to support, Magnolia could do this with impunity, and it consequently attracted customers who preferred this "clean" development methodology. Magnolia recognized the potential market appeal of what it had created, and in 2003 made the application available publicly. At that time, the product was IT-centric, depending mightily on customization by IT departments before the application could be exposed to business users.

Since then, Magnolia has worked assiduously to apply the same level of refinement for non-technical users to its user interface that it had previously created in the product's inner workings. The result was a happy combination, the architecture providing IT a flexible and scalable Java platform upon which to build, and the user interface furnishing business users a "Mac-like" level of usability.

The company has also taken a hard look at the site-building process. An analysis of the costs and risks involved in constructing custom websites led to the creation of the Standard Templating Kit (STK). A best-practice framework including a collection of page templates for typical use cases (including mobile-specific templates), the STK forms a flexible foundation on which designers and developers can build original websites, re-purposing the templates as they see fit. Also of interest to developers will be the STK's inclusion of tools that enable "extensible channel preview," customized previews for any device or web channel (iPhone and iPad previews are built directly into the CMS page-editing interface).

Key Recent Developments

Technical improvements in version 5.0 focus on the new App Framework, which enables the decoupling of the administrative UI from the back end (using RESTful Web services), making it easier to write new applications for Magnolia CMS. Secondly, the new icon-based UI supplies a level of usability for non-technical users similar that found in the best mobile operating systems. Next, the digital asset management (DAM) capabilities found in 5.0 have been significantly upgraded, resulting in functional parity with many mid-tier stand-alone DAM products. Magnolia has also bolstered CMS 5.0's workflow performance by replacing OpenWFE with JBoss JBPM 5.4. And last – as we foreshadowed in the previous *Compass Guide* on Magnolia CMS 4.3 – Magnolia has ramped up its sales and marketing initiatives, especially in the U.S. For this reason, many who have yet not heard of Magnolia soon will.

Profiling the Ideal Buyer

The ideal buyer of Magnolia CMS is one who seeks an enterprise-scale product, has complex integration requirements, and employs sufficient IT resources to develop and support its own customer-specific requirements. The architectural flexibility of Magnolia CMS gives its purchasers the ability to do nearly anything within the wide WCM spectrum, but its background as a partially community-developed application may mean that large clients with complex requirements need to develop product modules themselves (although there is a respectable range of modules available through the community). In sum, what comes out of the box is highly respectable, but a significant part of the platform is a tool set with which to build.

- **No Bias Against Open Source**

Clients with particularly strong IT capabilities are less likely to be biased against open source products such as Magnolia. This is especially true if their requirements are unique or unusually complex, since such customers would surely have to customize commercial products extensively anyway.

- **Enterprise-Scale Deployment**

Although nothing prevents customers from using Magnolia for small implementations, the flexibility and scalability of the product suggest that it is better suited for enterprise-wide deployments.

- **Preference for Best-of-Breed Development Approach**

Magnolia CMS's extreme flexibility gives it the ability to integrate with any number and type of enterprise application. It is therefore suited for the most heterogeneous of IT environments. However, because this was the vendor's intent for the platform from the beginning, Magnolia does not offer the range of applications available in the large suite-based solutions.

Magnolia Will Not Be a Good Fit, If...

Ars Logica always warns clients with complex WCM requirements who are considering open source products primarily "to save money" that they are not thinking clearly. Magnolia can be a good fit for clients with complex requirements, but it will be only because the final result is better, and not that the implementation is less time-consuming or expensive.

Clearly, those companies with a preference for .NET development should look elsewhere, unless the heterogeneity of the overall technical environment gives no preference to one type of development over another.

Key Product Strengths

Magnolia’s key strengths tend to center around its open technical architecture, which gives it unusual scalability and flexibility. This flexibility allows developers to integrate the application easily with other enterprise applications, and renders possible true services-oriented architectures (SOAs) consisting of discrete (complete and self-contained) modules. SOA has been a long-talked-about design methodology, but in reality is possible or practical with a relatively small percentage of CMS platforms – especially *not* those with a suite-based product line, which tend to have interdependencies between the modules.

The second key strength of Magnolia CMS 5.0 is the new icon-based user interface, which represents not only a complete redesign of, but also a substantial improvement to the very good UI already present in 4.5. We would have a difficult time conveying to readers how exceptionally rare it is for a UI with this level of refinement to appear in a product developed by a technology-driven (as opposed to market-ing-focused) software company. Commonly, software companies with founding CEOs or CTOs take the view that the best way to improve a product is to add features, which typically comes at the expense of usability. Not so with Magnolia.

In our interviews with Magnolia users, we found a continuation of the excellent customer satisfaction levels reported in our 2010 evaluation of Magnolia CMS 4.3, which stems partly from technologists’ satisfaction with the product’s flexibility, partly from business users’ satisfaction with its usability, and partly from the responsiveness of the Magnolia support team.

FIGURE 1 Magnolia 5.0, Key Product Strengths and Limitations

Below are several key product strengths and limitations that potential buyers should keep in mind when assembling vendor shortlists.

KEY STRENGTHS	KEY LIMITATIONS
Elegant user interface	Limited market presence outside Europe
Technical flexibility and scalability	Few out-of-the-box integrations with major enterprise applications (several currently in beta versions)
SOA-oriented open architecture	Company size may concern some.
Strong customer support (for enterprise editions)	Security & indemnification concerns rule out Community Edition for most projects.
Track record in banking, government, and media	

Source: Ars Logica, Inc.

Source of Information: Product testing, customer interviews, vendor updates, Vendor Questionnaire

One other strength of Magnolia CMS that will particularly interest developers is the use of Blossom, which dramatically eases some complex integrations by allowing Spring developers to work in their own environment and enabling them to use annotations to expose business logic to the web.

Key Product Limitations

Although a key product strength of Magnolia CMS for some customers, the key product limitation for others will be two-fold: (1) the lack of out-of-the-box integrations with major third-party enterprise applications, and (2) the limited number of additional product modules/types beyond CMS, which are available in the large suite-based solutions. The type of customer for whom this will be a limitation rather than a strength is the organization looking for a complete customer experience management platform from a single vendor. Typically, such prospects are those whose CMS purchase decisions are driven by marketing departments with clear long-term strategic vision, but with limited understanding of the technology components required to execute it. These purchase decisions are therefore commonly based on the comfort derived from the completeness of large, suite-based platforms, rather than from the comfort that could be derived from a best-of-breed platform's ability to integrate with third-party products.

Though previously mentioned in this report, the need for robust Java development skills should not be taken lightly. One key benefit of open source software in general is the availability of community-developed product modules. But such modules always require scrutiny and customization. Without the right level of in-house programming skills, software bugs can expose corporations to compliance concerns and legal risks. Furthermore, there will be required product features that Magnolia or the community may never produce. Enterprises should have a clear understanding of what they will want to develop themselves, along with the resources to do it. In the absence of a substantial commitment to ongoing product development and maintenance, open source solutions lose a substantial portion of their value proposition.

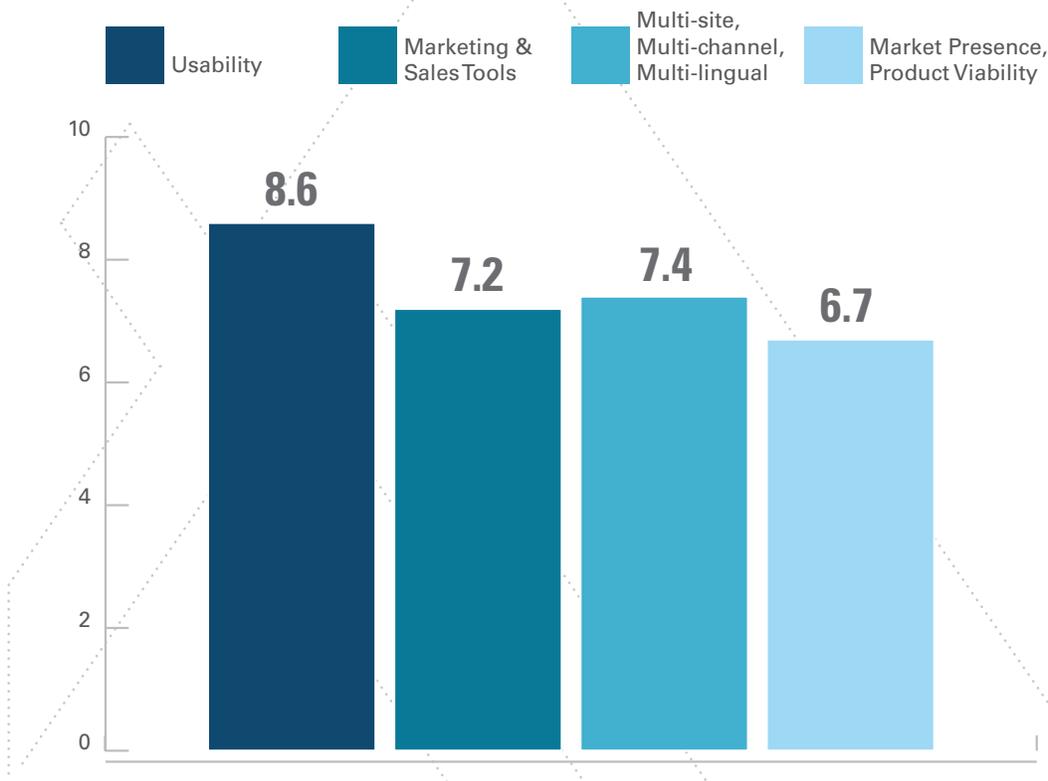
Magnolia's small company size may be a cause of concern for some. Historically, vendor viability is much better for companies whose growth has been organic and gradual. Magnolia is this type of vendor. Far riskier is the small company that takes significant venture capital and then faces unrealistic sales quotas which it must meet to survive. Still, small software vendors do pose inherent risks, such as rapid growth threatening product quality or health of the partner network. In Ars Logica's opinion, Magnolia presents little of either type of risk, but more of the latter than the former.

Vendor/Product Report Cards

The features, functions, and technical underpinnings of WCM products vary wildly, as do the customer requirements they are intended to satisfy. For this reason, the only reliable way to assure the best product fit for a particular client is to spend anywhere from several weeks to several months assessing the client's specific needs and analyzing product capabilities line by line. Still, Ars Logica is frequently asked to rate products in categories such as those in Figures 2 and 3. In using these ratings, please take care not to compare products in different market segments (see the Product Profile section of Page 4).

FIGURE 2 Magnolia Report Card for the Business User

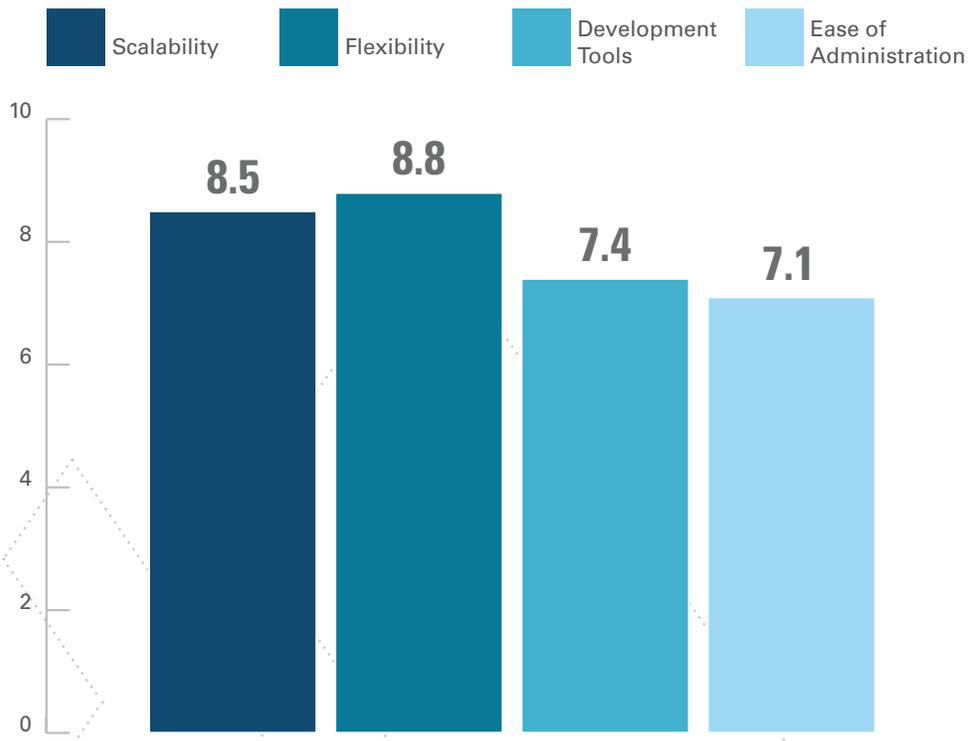
Figure 2 shows Ars Logica's rating of Magnolia 5.0 in four categories of critical importance to business users. Refer to Page 11 for an explanation of the evaluation criteria.



Source of Information: Product testing, customer interviews, Vendor Questionnaire

FIGURE 3 Magnolia Report Card for Technologists

Figure 3 shows Ars Logica's rating of Magnolia 5.0 in four categories of critical importance to technologists. Refer to Page 12 for an explanation of the evaluation criteria.



Source of Information: Product testing, customer interviews, Vendor Questionnaire

Report Card Evaluation Criteria

In the process of analyzing WCM solutions, Ars Logica has established a set of evaluation criteria, which at the highest level can be separated into four categories for non-technical business users and four categories for technologists. Scores in these categories represent averages of a large number of detailed criteria, and are meant to be used as a means of quickly comparing products within the same market segment.

Criteria for Business Users

- **Usability**

Usability refers to the relative ease of learning and using a WCM application. For non-technical business users, factors contributing to high scores in this category include intuitive and consistent user interfaces, streamlined task completion (i.e. minimal number of steps to complete a task), integration with the desktop, contextual editing capabilities, and documented high user adoption rates among a vendor's customers.

- **Marketing & Sales Tools**

Increasingly, enterprises are relying on marketing and sales tools within WCM applications to improve sales conversion rates, increase average transaction amounts, draw customers back to their Web sites, analyze online behavioral patterns, and so on. This category rates the presence and quality of such tools.

- **Multi-Site, Multi-Channel, Multi-Lingual Capabilities**

This category assesses a product's ability to support multiple sites; deliver content to multiple channels on multiple devices; and create, store, present, disseminate, and/or translate content into multiple languages. Scores in this category represent an average of a product's capabilities in all three of these broad functional areas.

- **Market Presence, Product Viability**

The Market Presence, Product Viability category rates both a vendor's overall market presence relative to competitors and its dedication to the continued development of its WCM products. If these two factors are not aligned with each other, an explanation of why will be included.

Criteria for Technologists

- **Scalability**

Scalability refers to the ability of a product to function well as system demands increase. Factors contributing to scalability are database size, query efficiency, bandwidth consumption, ease of system management, caching efficiency, load balancing, and mass content deployment capabilities.

- **Flexibility**

Flexibility denotes a product's ability to integrate easily with existing enterprise infrastructure, including operating systems, Web servers, databases, directories, development tools, and other enterprise applications such as ERP, CRM, document management systems, search, portals, and so forth.

- **Development Tools**

This category describes the quality of a product's integrated development environment (IDE), the technologies that the IDE incorporates, and overall ease of customized application development. Although this category refers primarily to development frameworks (Eclipse, e.g.), other ad hoc tools are also included, such as page templates, HTML/XML editors, WYSIWYG editors, PDF generators, and any other software that enables or eases the production, formatting and dissemination of content.

- **Ease of Administration**

Some WCM products require significantly more work to administer (sometimes 5-10 times more) than others. This category rates the relative resource intensity required to keep the system running smoothly, where higher scores reflect less work. Roughly speaking, higher scores also indicate better coordination of application components due to more methodical system design.



SERVICES

Advisory Services

To address clients' content management-related questions and problems that arise throughout the year, Ars Logica offers unlimited direct analyst access through its Analyst Anytime advisory services. These annual, subscription-based services provide guidance by phone or email within 24 hours on a wide range of issues. The number of inquiries submitted throughout

Software and Technology Selection

In our Software and Technology Selection engagements, Ars Logica maps clients' functional, technological, and strategic requirements to potential WCM solutions and identifies the software vendors whose products best satisfy these requirements. We maintain a continuously updated comprehensive matrix of the feature-functionality of most WCM vendors' products and solutions. We also receive frequent briefings from these vendors and have in-depth conversations and consulting engagements with their customers, ensuring that we always understand the actual state of vendors' offerings as well as their forward-looking strategic directions.

Custom Engagements

Ars Logica's expertise in WCM and related technologies such as digital asset management, records management, marketing campaign management, search, and portals, gives us the open-ended ability to help clients on a wide range of projects, including: building internal business cases, assessing technology requirements, analyzing software products and vendors, selecting and assembling software solutions, crafting Web strategies, and running corporate educational seminars. We also assist vendors in developing strategic roadmaps, and we and present our view of the WCM market at industry conferences and end-user events.

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