Open-Source CMS

Myth vs. Reality

OPEN-SOURCE VS. PROFESSIONAL PUBLISHING CONTENT MANAGEMENT SYSTEMS:
WHICH OPTION IS BEST FOR PUBLISHERS?

*e*Publishing

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Digital strategy for today's publishers, media businesses and associations requires hitting a moving target. Successful execution creates the need for complex integrations, business rules and data flows – not merely to manage audience and content, but to monetize them.

The idea that your website is a standalone element of your business is obsolete — it is no longer where you just read an article. Conceived and executed correctly, it is the living, breathing heart of a dynamic ecosystem: where your content, advertising, marketing, events, audience and sales data live.

If you're in need of a new site, you're about to make one of the most critical decisions facing your organization. Besides building a new website, can you afford to pass up the opportunity to break down data silos, create greater operational efficiencies, increase reader engagement and open additional revenue streams?

Successful outcomes require the proper people, processes & technology.

This report challenges the notion that open-source content management solutions are a good fit for publishers or business information companies. In this white paper, with the needs of modern media organizations in mind, we debunk commonly held beliefs about open source.

The siren call of "free and simple" is a tempting combination at first glance, but open-source systems like WordPress and Drupal have many hidden pitfalls:

›› Plugins and extensive customization add complexity and reduce control.

›› Integrations and APIs with open source have limited functionality, reinforcing rather than breaking down data silos.

›› Open source is not designed to manage and monetize content across channels.

›› Open-source migrations can be more difficult and riskier than those with professional publishing systems.

›› Built with the broadest possible user base in mind, open source requires massive custom functionality and ongoing development expense to meet the needs of a media organization.

›› The widespread use of open-source CMS, as well as its available source code and slow fixes, has made it a target for hacking and security breaches.

In truth, open source cannot deliver the return on investment or the control publishers require. It can't accomplish what a professional publishing system does, no matter how many plugins you throw at it. Enterprise publishing systems are purpose-built for the modern diversified media company: fast, secure and focused on driving more revenue.

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MYTH 1

Open source does the same things publishing systems can

Claiming open-source CMS is as good or better than proprietary platforms is like saying a screwdriver is better than a hammer – the superior tool depends upon your desired outcome. The truth is, open source was built to serve many masters. As a result, it can't seamlessly handle necessary integrations for the modern media organization. Lack of sophisticated APIs and integrations on open source creates limited functionality, holding media companies back from achieving the holistic approach their organizations require for success in today's market.

REALITY: Integrations on open source are more limited than they appear

Integrating your website with your company's other software systems—including email service providers, circulation/fulfillment, marketing automation, events, webinars and advertising—is essential for a modern media enterprise. This holistic approach creates more efficient systems and substantially improves conversion rates. If your CMS can't seamlessly handle integrations, you are left with the same processes you had yesterday.

A significant limitation of open-source plugins is that integrations are always 1:1. Companies with sophisticated needs can be forced into four or five parallel and siloed integrations, with zero communication between them. In contrast, ePublishing created a unified five-way integration for a client with their Learning Management System (LMS), order management system, content management system, ecommerce system and user database. The client's previous parallel systems had a 20% error rate, which was immediately reduced to zero. This integration provided highly profitable opportunities for the client that were virtually impossible with open source.

Customizing multiple open-source plugins to make them work together not only adds unexpected cost but inevitably adds unnecessary bulk, which inhibits site performance. The longer it takes a page to render – measured in milliseconds – the more likely people will abandon your site, and the more likely Google will downgrade you.

Integrations can provide highly profitable opportunities that are virtually impossible with open source

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REALITY: **Open-source CMS does not *manage* or monetize content**

Open source may be called a content management system, but the only thing it actually does is place content on a website. There are no true professional, enterprise-wide management capabilities.

With an enterprise publishing system like ePublishing, content can be both managed and monetized. Valuable content is distributed by writers and editors who create articles once and distribute them directly into multiple channels. Flow content into InDesign templates for print; deliver real-time targeted feeds to mobile apps; automatically send licensed content to syndicators; and automate e-newsletters, integrated with your email service provider.

REALITY: **APIs in enterprise systems empower faster, more secure development**

Staying ahead of the curve is the hallmark of professional software – and one place where Open Source cannot compete is with robust, secure API's. Many companies simply log onto their systems and accomplish everything they need. However, for technical users—or non-technical users who have third parties they want to connect to their systems—an API is the way to go. The more sophisticated and flexible the API, the easier it is to work with and the more you can accomplish.

The best publishing APIs deliver access to every underlying data element within a system — including all content types, workflow, ecommerce, directories, media assets, advertising and user data. With simple queries you can securely access and track vital user details including subscriptions, article reads, demographics, media views, white paper downloads, event signups, purchases and more.

The power of the API does not stop there — if you want to integrate third parties or internal systems you have the ultimate tool to do so. Deliver a vendor a fully published API specification and let them integrate with you making for virtually limitless possibilities.

A truly robust API also puts the headless approach of write once, publish anywhere, directly into the hands of a tech team, allowing you to rapidly pull articles, blogs, publications, newsletters, directories, events, classifieds, products and their related content into multiple external publishing streams – both online and in print.

APIs in combination with professionally managed SaaS software, tools and user support, create the best of both worlds.

A holistic approach, integrating your CMS with your other business systems, is more efficient and substantially improves conversion rates

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MYTH 2

With enough plugins, you can do anything

Au contraire! An open-source system limits your growth potential in media where, as it's said, "he with the most data wins." To get the most from your data, every system must seamlessly integrate to achieve a full 360-degree view of your business and the opportunities that lie within. On open source, integrations are typically attempted with plugins: third-party add-on software that extends the functionality of a simple base system.

Ask yourself: When your new website is complete, will the amount and quality of your data improve? Will your data no longer live in silos? Will you end up with more actionable capabilities than you now have? Don't go through the expense and hassle of redeveloping your website unless the answer is yes.

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REALITY: Added plugins mean added complexity

Plugins and custom development allow you to add capabilities to your open-source website that make it more than just a blogging platform. But each plugin installed adds a new layer of complexity, conflicts and risk. Given that plugins and their underlying systems aren't developed by the same teams, you can never be confident that they will play nicely with each other. And you won't know whether they do until you install them, nor whether they will continue to work together each time you update.

Contrast this with the ePublishing SaaS CMS, where new features and improvements are baked into the platform, are fully system/data aware, and optimized to work reliably with each new platform release and update.

With open source, it can be difficult to determine who or what is responsible for problems, leaving you with less control

REALITY: More plugins mean less control

With a customized and plugin-driven open-source CMS, it can be difficult to determine who or what is at fault for the inevitable bugs and problems, leaving you with less control and certainty over security and reliability. Plugins are designed to work well with an open-source system's default implementation. Adding design templates, third-party widgets and your customizations can introduce unpredictable behavior, slow site speed or even terminal, website-crashing errors. You won't be able to count on the plugin author's technical support. Even with a paid support contract, plugin developers can only certify that their own code works. Functionality with other plugins is not their responsibility.

When you encounter a problem, online forums are your only option for getting help. Sean Breen, CEO of agencyQ, a digital marketing firm in Washington, DC, explains why this is a problem: "As a service provider looking for support for critical digital platforms, I don't want to depend on the equivalent of begging in the street for answers – that is what support is like with an open-source CMS. I want to know that I'll get a real person that is part of an established company, to support me and my clients' needs."

This lack of accountability is just the tip of the iceberg. Abandoned plugins are so common that WordPress has introduced an on-page warning message identifying plugins that haven't been updated in more than two years. "Approximately half of the plugins in the (WordPress) directory" display this warning, according to an analysis by Addendio Founder Luca Fracassi. It takes a comparatively small amount of time and financial investment to churn out a simple plugin, and most plugins are funded either through upfront fees or by offering it free and then trying to sell your first-party data behind the scenes (beware the fine print).

Plugin developers have a poor track record of staying in business long enough to ensure compatibility with future platform versions or helping dissatisfied customers when things go wrong.

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MYTH 3

Open source gives site owners more portability

This myth lingers because of the mistaken impression that the wide availability of open-source themes and plugins must mean you can simply replace one with another. Ask anyone who has tried to migrate a business website from one open-source system to another or even redevelop on the same one. You will likely be surprised by the response.

REALITY: **Migrating websites is difficult no matter which system you use**

Before you build a new website, you must consider your future needs lest you be faced with the task of starting from scratch when you outgrow your capabilities. This is true whether you're relying on open-source CMSs and plugins or whether you're using a proprietary system. However, purpose-built enterprise SaaS systems like ePublishing have a clear advantage.

Most successful publishers have had to expand or change business models to thrive—flexibility in serving multiple business models is paramount. If you begin with an open-source system, your options are limited from the start.

Most open-source CMS users find the simple act of altering their site's appearance by changing to a new theme or template can send a website back to the drawing board. Version updates pile up after the initial customizations required to make open source work correctly in the first place, which rapidly creates complexity. This quickly compounds expenses and becomes a manager's worst nightmare. We've seen publishers with so many customizations that their open-source CMS could no longer accept essential security upgrades—a trap you must avoid.

Flexibility in serving multiple business models is paramount. If you begin with an open-source system, your options are limited from the start

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REALITY: You will likely need to reverse-engineer your website

If extensive customizations are required, continuity from one open-source developer to the next is nearly impossible. Your development shop won't give you their secret sauce that enabled them to bend the plugins to your needs. Even with in-house teams, we have never met a client with an accurate record of every plugin and customization. When you decide to move, the new developers will likely have to do extensive testing through trial and error.

Breen at agencyQ explains why this is problematic: "When you, as the customer, are dependent on the agency or firm that customized the code for the upgrade path, then you have closed off the opportunity to upgrade the system."

For ePublishing, maintaining development continuity and streamlining migrations is a core requirement, with a team of developers working on the same code every day. Redesigns, when you need them, are very straightforward with zero lost data, reverse-engineering or performance impact. In the event you must leave, ePublishing makes it easy to import your content into another system.

WordPress is functional but not luxurious: Working in it feels kind of like filling in a coloring book.

The Nation, January 2019

REALITY: You end up owning nothing but your content

Some people think that with open source, they end up with some type of ownership control of their website – more than with a proprietary system. You don't. In both cases, all you own is your content. You may own some plugin licenses, but even when you rebuild your site on the same open-source platform, you will leave most of your investment behind and start over.

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One Throat to Choke

THE IMPORTANCE OF ACCOUNTABILITY IN A PARTNER

Markets shift. Things change. As the landscape evolves, a proactive partner that accepts accountability is vital.

For example, the European Union's law on data protection and privacy – the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) – caused a flurry of activity by businesses rushing to comply. The California Consumer Privacy Act complicated regulatory compliance issues even further. Media organizations that collect any data face steep potential fines if they don't comply with the new regulations.

The problem: If you have an open-source website built on plugins owned by dozens of small companies, how can you know it's compliant? With open source, you don't.

There's often no way of knowing how the plugins you depend on handle data. Worse yet, many plugins are designed to "phone home" — intentionally sharing or stealing your customer data and assets. You cannot rely on your open-source web developer either, because they don't really know. You're stuck because it's easy to pass the blame and largely impossible to audit third-party plugins.

The solution: Professional systems are engineered specifically for media organizations by subject matter experts. ePublishing knows exactly where and how customer data is used, and was compliant well in advance. Little things add up, and this is but one example of how important accountability is in choosing a technology partner.

Fully integrated professional publishing platforms continually adapt to the market. You are not the one who must follow every nuance of the changing landscape.

You have one partner responsible for "keeping the trains running on time." Media organizations work with only one team to ensure that they are evolving, compliant and following data-collection best practices. In other words, the buck stops here, with just one throat to choke.

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MYTH 4

An open-source CMS provides a better return on investment

The perceived low initial cost of most open-source CMS websites may draw you in. But before you leap, make sure you're considering all costs and benefits. Don't be taken by surprise. Consider everything from continuous updates to the power of a platform that converts your prospects into customers and even brand evangelists.

REALITY: Open source has surprising hidden costs

Open source is designed to work for the broadest user base possible." You'll require custom design and advanced plugins if you want functionality suitable for a media organization, information provider or association. This leads to a marked increase in both your initial and long-term investments. Whether paying for access to premium plugins, using your internal developer's time or hiring an outside developer to get the features you need, it all comes at an expense. If you do not invest in custom functionality, the opportunity cost of operational inefficiencies and lost revenue is even higher.

What's more, you'll incur an ongoing operational expense in keeping your plugin versions updated and in sync. Wordpress alone required a stunning 67 updates from 2016 through 2018. Add plugin updates to that, and the ongoing development work is considerable. One publisher with multiple Drupal sites said updates happened nearly every week. They consider the continuing cost for routine Drupal updates and patches to be "ongoing maintenance." Sadly, these sunk costs only go to maintaining the status quo, instead of propelling the business forward.

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REALITY: **Open-source CMSs aren't designed to increase publishing revenue**

Online publishing success hinges on your ability to grow revenue through advertising, increase reader engagement and monetize your content and users. Open source was not designed for these purposes.

A study conducted by PWC's Digital Services group found that 94 percent of senior executives called personalization "critical" or "important" to reach customers. The ePublishing CMS personalizes the delivery of recommended content based on both demographics and user behavior, increasing your reader engagement. Open source, in contrast, lacks the infrastructure to collect and store user demographics or behavioral data, let alone leverage it. With this data, you can create strong cross-selling and upselling opportunities, as well as develop targeted ad packages, for a healthy return on your technology investment.

ePublishing clients currently drive diversified revenue more than 40 different ways. Lead-generation programs, site licenses, buyers' guides, training programs and CE credits, ad targeting, sponsored content and dozens more revenue streams are propelled by a system engineered explicitly for media and publishing. Having one seamless platform is vastly different than attempting to string these capabilities together with plugins and widgets.

REALITY: **With open source, you're living with "good-enough" solutions built for other industries**

More than a quarter of all websites are built on WordPress, by far the most-used of open-source options. Another 10 percent are built using other open-source players like Drupal and Joomla. Just a small percentage of these open-source sites are publishers. That means that when you build your website on open source, you're relying on a system that looks at publishers no differently than home businesses, service companies, and bloggers. As a result, opportunity costs may be the most significant hidden downside to open source. When a new market opportunity arises, you may have painted yourself into a corner of compromises and workarounds.

In contrast, ePublishing was purpose-built for publishers. Out of the box, it integrates with common fulfillment, advertising, email and many other systems you use. We understand your business model and have engineered our system to help you make more money.

The ongoing cost to maintain the avalanche of open source updates only goes to maintaining the status quo, instead of propelling your business forward

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MYTH 5:

Open-source systems are secure

A business that depends on its website for subscription transactions, advertising, e-commerce and building a trove of customer data—as most publishers now do—must prioritize security. When analyzing options, consider how well your users' data will be protected. While nobody expects to be hacked, it's not a risk you can afford to take. With ever-increasing regulatory requirements, this is more important than ever.

REALITY: Open-source systems' widespread use makes them a target

According to iMedia, "With so many companies using WordPress, hackers view the platform as a prime target for massive-scale attacks."

In just one recent attack, more than 21,000 websites were compromised when hackers exploited vulnerabilities in three common WordPress plugins, but site owners' problems went well beyond unintentional security flaws. 200,000 WordPress websites with the "Display Widgets" plugin were corrupted by the plugin author's intentionally malicious code, which allowed him to publish spam to users' websites.

Website security provider Securi analyzed more than 11,000 infected websites, agnostic of platform. Of those, a whopping 75% were running on WordPress.

According to their analysis, the "improper deployment, configuration, and overall maintenance by the webmasters and their hosts" was to blame for many of the security issues, and "the leading cause of infection could be traced to the exploitation of software vulnerabilities in the platform's extensible components," including "plugins, extensions, components, modules, templates, themes and other similar integrations." In other words, the more plugins or modules, the more vulnerable your site. To keep your website secure, you must keep up (and pay for) regular updates. In the same report, more than 50% of infected WordPress websites were out of date, as were a whopping 81% of Drupal sites.

In just one recent attack, more than 21,000 websites were compromised when hackers exploited vulnerabilities in three common WordPress plugins

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REALITY: Open code and slow fixes make open source vulnerable

Plugins, templates and other customizations represent the most significant security threat to open-source CMSs, but the open-source systems themselves experience numerous security breaches. Hackers recently used WordPress's native commenting functionality to inject malicious code and take control of administrator accounts. According to Info Security Magazine, it took WordPress 14 months to release a patch that corrected the vulnerability.

Because the code is available to the public, attacks like these are inevitable. While it is possible to invest in security, open-source applications pose substantial risks. According to Business.com, "everyone using the open-source code understands how to get around various protections." The dark web trades in techniques to hack shared open-source software. Professional publishing platforms, in contrast, are more secure thanks to their "heavily guarded source code that requires a license in order to access it."

To be fair, open source regularly releases updates to patch known security vulnerabilities, and most of these are prompt once discovered. However, because updating to the latest version may create incompatibilities with existing plugins or other customizations, many open-source users forgo or delay these critical updates to keep their site's functionality intact. This is why, according to Google's Webmaster Central blog, "even legit good quality plugins and themes can become dangerous if you do not update them as soon as a new version becomes available."

The dark web trades in techniques to hack open-source software. Professional publishing platforms are more secure thanks to heavily guarded source code

REALITY: Information security should not be left to open source

Hackers aren't the only risk to your website: Natural disasters and other events threaten to slow down websites or bring them down altogether. Using WordPress as an example, free backup plugins are available, but they typically require you to store those backups on your own server, which makes you vulnerable. Off-site storage is available via premium plugins or hosting services, but you must pay extra for something that is an included service with a SaaS platform. *e*

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MYTH 6:

Open source will grow with us

Let's face it: Publishers' business models are changing rapidly – and are likely to continue to morph far faster than any of us can predict. Not long ago many publishers were making money via one primary channel: for some that was advertising, and for others it was subscriptions. Now, successful publishers also depend on webinars, live events, data/research, sponsored/native content, one-off product sales, lead generation, pure ecommerce and more. The change is dramatic and requires an entirely new set of tools to diversify your revenue.

Unfortunately, open source is not nimble enough to meet your fast-changing needs. When a new opportunity presents itself, you want to be ready. It's not the time to shop for new plugins or, worse yet, wait for plugin developers to catch up. ePublishing simply turns on what you need.

REALITY: **A solution built on a Software-as-a-Service (SaaS) platform is engineered for your business growth**

SaaS-based platforms hold many benefits for publishers, not the least of which is scalability. You also profit from the changes made over the years to address the growing pains of hundreds of brands that use the ePublishing system. These media and association brands also drive numerous platform upgrades, which are incorporated for all ePublishing users via regular updates at no additional cost.

The bottom line: Our clients grow alongside our publisher user base, benefiting from their combined experiences and best practices. e

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YOUR NEXT STEPS

It makes sense that you should seriously consider the pros and cons of open source. While open-source CMS certainly has its benefits—simplistic interface and multiple plugins—there are, as with any platform, downsides. As you continue to evaluate your CMS options, include these questions among those you ask potential vendors:

Features Versus Outcomes

Features are important, but don't limit yourself by starting with a list. Start instead with your ultimate goal: growing revenue, readership and sales. Ask how you will do that, then look at which features will get you there. Is yours a traditional business model of monetizing content through advertising, or do you take a diversified approach that includes a paywall, directories, advertising, ecommerce, native advertising/sponsored content and more? Might you need additional capabilities as you grow? How well does the vendor know your business? Are the features you want included in the platform, or is customization required?

Make sure that the platform you choose fits your business model today and can grow with you into the future; you shouldn't have to adapt your business to the system. And consider the challenges that may come with growth: Does it make sense even theoretically to stake your future growth on a jigsaw puzzle of software built by dozens of unknown sources vs. one robust platform specifically engineered for your needs?

Integrations

To achieve your business goals, the ability to integrate your core business systems is critical. Many publishers are stuck in data silos for subscriptions, newsletters and site registration, lead-gen activities, conference registration and more. Integrating these will provide a full picture of your audience, allowing for sophisticated targeting and a seamless experience for your users. If your system does not include built-in functionality like ecommerce and fulfillment, consider the advantages of a single integrated platform. What's the cost, both in dollars and time, for staff and outside development?

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Support

What can you expect from your vendor or developer when you need sophisticated help regarding advertising, subscriptions, editorial, audience data and how they can work together for you? When you have a serious problem, can you get help 24/7/365? How long has your vendor been in business? How familiar are they with every aspect of publishing? Will they bring proven techniques for revenue growth? The answers to these questions will give you an idea of how reliable your vendor will be in supporting your ongoing development and operational needs.

Security

On the security front, you'll want to address both how the website will be protected from hacking and spammers, as well as how backups and cloud services are handled.

SaaS

A cloud-based platform like ePublishing allows you to benefit from other publishers and organizations with similar business models. You receive new and innovative digital functionality added to the system all year long. The SaaS approach means you do not have to pay for version upgrades or to fix broken widgets, unlike the constant upgrades and security patches necessary with open-source.

Return on Investment

It's not just the initial cost. Consider the total cost of ownership for the platform you're using. Include subsequent customizations and ongoing maintenance, such as upgrading versions three to four times a month. Are these included or available piecemeal? Also, consider your team's resources spent bending open source to your needs if you require multiple customizations. Investing in a publishing-specific CMS such as ePublishing provides dozens of additional publisher-specific features to save your team valuable operational time while providing greater control. Imagine how time saved throughout your organization will contribute to ROI.

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ABOUT ePUBLISHING

ePublishing drives maximum profit for publishers and media companies with tools and services that empower users to create a wide range of business models, leverage new income streams, and automatically generate deep reader engagement with Contextual Content, Community and Commerce.

ePublishing's primary product is a complete Enterprise Publishing System (EPS), which goes beyond a CMS by building audience, improving productivity, managing digital assets and driving more revenue.

Taking the hassle and risk out of digital platform management, ePublishing delivers greater value and efficiency with next-generation APIs, deep third-party integrations, flexible workflows and features spanning content, ecommerce, marketing, personalization and audience management. Continually evolving Software-as-a-Service breaks down silos, delivers high-context experiences, and transforms simple content management into dynamic content monetization.

Putting ePublishing at the center of your business ends your dependence on multiple applications, each with its own login, user interface and delivery channel. Sure, you can piece everything together; but only with a publishing-focused CMS can you connect your content and services with customer needs and preferences to create value for readers and sponsors while generating revenue for you. With ePublishing, you can:

›› **Create content once and deploy it via multiple channels** to match your readers' preferred device – browser, mobile, tablet, digital, print, email or download – saving you dozens, or for some clients hundreds, of editorial and operational hours.

›› **Deliver and monetize content in context, supported by semantic intelligence and topic pages.** Readers will discover new resources, such as events, downloads, buyers' guides and products—all delivered in context.

›› **Integrate your website** with your circulation/fulfillment system, email service provider, CRM, CDP, marketing automation, ad server and many other services.

ePublishing prides itself on obsessive 24x7 service provided by experts in both the software and publishing industries. We offer a single point of contact who delivers access to all the professionals in our organization that you may need, including: designers, developers, software architects, database administrators, systems engineers, SEO experts, analysts, strategists and more.

Learn more about how ePublishing's powerful features work together to help you realize growth at ePublishing.com.

MAY WE HELP?

We'd like to learn more about your business to tailor a solution to meet your goals. Please call **312-768-6800** and get what you want from a partner who cares – more revenue, better technology, improved workflow and lower costs.

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