



A White Paper from
Effective Database Management, LLC

The Three Primary Data Management Systems Within Associations and How They Are Related

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Introduction

For most associations, there are three primary systems related to data management: the association management system, typically the primary AMS including accounts receivable, referred to here as the **AMS**; the financial management system, a general ledger software, referred to here as the **FMS**; and the content management system, managing your website, referred to here as the **CMS**. (Note: Some associations may have other systems such as government relations or broadcast email systems; while not unimportant, this paper concerns itself with the primary systems.)

I'm often asked how these systems are related and which system should manage which data. This white paper explains the primary functions of each system and how each is related to the other two.

Technical note: The term “served” or “served up” indicates that the information displayed on your website is delivered from a given location and “displayed” as a web page or web part. For example, “When the customer comes to the website, they are seeing pages mostly served by the content management system” means the pages in question are delivered from the content management system.

The Three Systems

The AMS: *The* source of data for all customer information. This includes, but is not limited to, contact information and all functional data (e.g., membership, events, subscriptions, products, exhibits, sponsorship, committees, etc.). The AMS also serves as the accounts receivable package for the association. That is, all money coming *into* the association is processed through the AMS. When there is a question about billing (e.g., who has paid or not paid for a given event), that answer is found in the AMS. There are over 100 products that bill themselves as association management systems: some examples include iMIS, netForum, and internet4associations.

The FMS: The financial management system serves as the general ledger for the association. This means all accounts payable (expenses, or money outgoing) is tracked here, as well as summary level data for all income (e.g., total amount of money *collected* for a given event, total amount of money *billed* for a given event). When there is a question about how an event is doing overall (i.e., income vs. expenses), that answer is found in the FMS. There are dozens of financial management systems available to associations: some examples include QuickBooks, Microsoft Great Plains/Dynamics, and MAS90.

The CMS: The content management system serves as the “website manager” for the association. The CMS manages the structure and vast majority of content (though not all content, as we'll see below) that is on your website. When there is a question about website content (e.g., how do we update the mission statement for the association), that answer is

found in the CMS. There are dozens of content management systems available to associations: some examples include Drupal, Joomla, SharePoint, and Ektron.

Key Principles

- The **AMS** captures *detailed* financial data from an accounts receivable (A/R) perspective. Detailed data includes who purchased what, on what date, and how they paid. The **FMS** captures only *summary level* A/R data. Summary level data includes only total income and receivables for a given product.
- The **AMS** serves up dynamic data to your website (i.e., data that changes frequently, like directories, event registration information) and manages all A/R financial transactions (e.g., membership joins/renews, product purchases). The **CMS** may serve up only the “shell” of the pages that contain this information.
- The **CMS** serves up all “static” website information (i.e., data that changes very infrequently, like articles, white papers, mission statement, association history, etc.).
- The **CMS** controls the general structure and style of the site, and limits access to who can change static (i.e., non-dynamic) information on the website.
- The **AMS** allows members access to members-only data through a login process validated against the **AMS**. The **CMS** allows members into the members-only pages once the user has been validated. Validation should pass from page-to-page, meaning that the user only has to log in once per session (or only once if their credentials are “saved” for future use).

How the Three Systems are Related

This may be most easily explained using typical scenarios that many associations face:

1. **Event registration** (or any other online financial transaction): This example assumes that the **AMS** manages the entire events set up process and serves pages to the website which provide the customer with information on the event, including the ability to register online.

What the customer sees: The customer goes online to your website. They locate the event for which they want to register. When they click “register now” they are asked to “log in” to the system (typically using email address and password). The system recognizes them as a member, they register for the event at the member prices, they pay with a credit card, and they receive an email confirmation.

What happens “behind the scenes”: When the customer comes to the website, they are seeing pages mostly served by the content management system (e.g. the home page). As soon as they click on the event information, however, they are now seeing data

being served by the AMS itself (e.g., event date, event pricing). When they click on the “register now” button, the system needs to know who they are, so it asks for login credentials. This login information is compared against the AMS and if the AMS recognizes the information, the user is then served member pricing, from the AMS. Once the user has registered and paid, all of that information is captured in the AMS.

At the end of the week or month, summary data from the AMS is calculated and passed (in an electronic file) to the financial management system. Now the AMS knows that this person has registered and paid, and the FMS knows the cumulative dollars collected and still owed.

During this process, the CMS is used a bit, the AMS is used very heavily, and the FMS is used during “reconciliation.”

2. **Directory Look up for Members Only**– looking up other members: This example assumes that the AMS serves up directory pages and in this case the directory is open only to members.

What the customer sees: The customer goes online to your website and clicks on “look up a member.” The website then asks him to log in. The system recognizes them as a member, and the user is free to search the directory.

What happens “behind the scenes”: When the user enters his or her credentials, this login information is compared against the AMS and if the AMS recognizes the information as a member, the member can then see the directory look up page. The directory look up page is served by the AMS, and all results of the directory search also come from the AMS.

During this process, the CMS is used a bit, the AMS is used very heavily, and the FMS is not used at all, because no financial transactions took place.

3. **Profile Management for Members and Non-members** – This example refers to the ability of a customer to self-manage their contact information, e.g., their mailing address, phone, and email.

What the customer sees: The customer goes online to your website and clicks on “manage my contact info.” The website then asks him to log in. After he enters his login information, if he is in the AMS, the system presents him with his contact information, which he can then edit (as allowed by the association) key contact fields.

What happens “behind the scenes”: When he enters his login information, the login information is compared against the AMS and if the AMS recognizes the information as a customer (either member or non-member), the member can then see his contact information and edit certain fields. The data is served by the association management system.

During this process, the CMS is used a bit, the AMS is used very heavily, and the FMS is not used at all, because no financial transactions took place.

4. **Access to members-only content** (e.g., articles that only members can read for free).

What the customer sees: The customer goes online to your website and clicks on “read this article,” which is linked to members-only content. The website then asks him to log in. After he enters his login information, if he is a member, the system presents him with the article that he wants to read.

What happens “behind the scenes”: When he enters his login information, the login information is compared against the AMS and if the AMS recognizes the information as a member, the member can then see the article. The article page is served by the content management system.

During this process, the CMS is used a bit, the AMS is used very heavily, and the FMS is not used at all, because no financial transactions took place.

5. **Access to “public” content** (e.g., articles that anyone can read for free).

What the customer sees: The customer goes online to your website and clicks on “read this article,” which is links to “public” content. The article page is served by the content management system.

What happens “behind the scenes”: The CMS manages the content of the web pages, and since the pages are not “members-only” or password protected, the page is served up to the customer.

During this process, only the CMS is involved. The FMS and AMS are not used.

Conclusion

To be most successful, an association will have some variation of all three of these systems (AMS, CMS, FMS). The level of sophistication of each system will be driven by the needs of the association. When the AMS and CMS are tightly integrated, association staff can easily and quickly update data and content on the website. When the AMS and FMS are tightly integrated, no re-keying of financial data is required, which not only reduces staff labor, but improves the accuracy of financial reconciliation.

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About the Author

Wes Trochlil is president of Effective AMS Management, located in Hamilton, VA. For nearly two decades, Wes has worked in and with over a hundred associations, non-profits, and membership organizations throughout the US, ranging in size from three staff to over 700. In that time Wes has provided a range of consulting services, from general consulting on data management issues to full-scale, organization-wide selection and implementation of data management systems.

Having written over 50 articles and hundreds of blog posts, Wes is the most published author on data management in the association market. In addition to his articles, Wes is also the author of the book *Put Your Data to Work: 52 Tips and Techniques for Effectively Managing Your Database*, published by ASAE & The Center for Association Leadership.

Wes is a frequent speaker and writer for organizations throughout the US and Canada. Wes has written for and been quoted in *Associations Now*, *CRMBuyer*, *Association Management*, *ECommerce Times*, *Association Trends*, *techicrossing.com*, *SearchSMB.com*, *eWeek*, *monster.com*, *Executive Update*, *The Membership Management Report*, and *FORUM* magazines, and appeared as an expert on CRM issues on Microsoft's Non-Profit TV program.

Prior to starting his own consulting firm, Wes has nearly ten years experience working in associations as director of membership and marketing. He has worked for four national and international trade associations, serving as Director of Membership, Marketing, Customer Service, and Communications. With all four associations, Wes was responsible for managing the association's AMS, from membership AMSs of less than 1,000 records to fully integrated AMSs containing over 100,000 membership, publication, and seminar registration records.

Wes is a member of ASAE and the Center for Association Leadership, where he serves on the Technology Section Council. He is past Chair of the Membership Section Council. He is also a member of the Society for Advancement of Consulting.