



The art of a successful site

Three steps to a more
effective website

Success is as success does

It is pretty safe to say that anyone reading this will want their site to be a success. After all a successful website can drive business, retain customers and save money.

Of course, one person's success may be quite different from another's. So when we talk about 'success', what are we really talking about? Is it about the look and feel of the design? Is it the architecture and technical performance? Or is it about the user's experience of getting what they need from the site?

As you can see, there's no easy answer. Or is there?

What's your website done for you lately?

Most people would probably agree that a website is successful if it meets the business's objectives. This is true no matter what they are – eg fast friction-free sales for the e-tailer; thought leadership and relationship building for the business consultancy etc. Looking at it this way, the key questions become:

- Is it delivering a high return on investment (ROI)?
- Is it reaching the people you need to reach?
- Is it sustaining relationships across the sales cycle?
- Is it converting browsers to buyers?
- Is it delivering repeat purchases?

The problem for many site owners is that they cannot answer these questions with any real level of certainty. While they probably know they should measure these things, they're discouraged from doing so because they don't believe they have the time, money or knowledge.

Of course some do measure performance. They know how many hits they're getting. They know where most of them are coming from (both geographically and the referring sites). And they know what pages are visited most often. These are obviously all good things to know. But they're just the start.

What if...?

You see, what these measurements can't tell you is whether there's a better way. They can't tell you that if you changed just one part of the site, you'd get exponentially higher results. They can't tell you whether one communications channel might convert business 10 times more effectively than another. And they can't provide insights into whether users need more explanation of your products or whether they simply need you to get out of the way of the purchase.

The result is that website owners spend time and money getting more and more people to the site when they could probably produce better results simply by changing what visitors see when they get there.

The thing is, the existing data won't tell you that. (It's a secret.)

Working the rules

Amazon lists over 95,000 books on the various facets of creating websites. Whether at the strategic or tactical level, each presents the rules you'll need to follow to develop a winning site. And for the most part, each will reinforce the notion that this stuff is really, really complicated.

Of course, some of it is complicated. But it's all too easy to get lost in complexity. Complexity can lead to a kind of development paralysis. If it is all so complex, should we even bother (especially if the site is doing ok)?

Fortunately, at a basic level, there are really just three rules for creating an effective website:

- 1 Do what works
- 2 Don't do what doesn't work
- 3 Know the difference

The problem of course is determining exactly (and objectively) what does work and having a way of telling the difference between more effective strategies and less effective ones.

First A then B then C

Most marketers still take a sequential approach to developing and improving their sites. They will try something one time. If they are happy with the results, they will try it again. If not, they will try something else. If this new thing works better, they may stick with it. If not, they'll either go back to the earlier approach or try yet another new one.

It's all pretty logical. Especially when we consider the problem of what analytics can't tell you about your site. If you want to improve you need to try new things. As the widely attributed saying goes, "If you do what you've always done, you'll get what you always got."

It's a slippery thing, success

Of course, deciding precisely what success really looks like is not always easy. For example, say you currently convert 3% of your visitors to customers. Is that good? Well, if the market average is 1%, you've got every right to be happy. If, however, the average is 20%, you've got a pretty big problem.

Likewise you may have increased your conversion rate by 5% with your latest offer. Great, you say. But is it? How do you know? What if another offer would have increased it by 15%? What if a change in layout would have delivered the same results without the need for any offer whatsoever?

If you go with the traditional combination the sequential approach and gut feel, you may never stumble on the right way to deliver true success from your website.

Introducing the three steps

So you're with us on the limitations of the traditional approach. But if that isn't the best way to move forward, what is? Glad you asked.

To plan a more effective route forward, you'll need three things:

- 1 An understanding of what's happening across your site right now (analytics)
- 2 A plan for where you're going and how you'll know when you get there (KPIs)
- 3 And a way of testing different options in real time (optimisation)

In the following sections, we'll take a look at each of these in turn.

Step 1

While there are some things analytics can't tell you, without them you really are in the dark. Used well, they'll give you a good idea of which content is most appealing, which products are attracting the most attention and where visitors come from to reach your site (eg direct, search, affiliate etc).

Analytics will give you comprehensive information on the number of visitors, page views, duration, browser types, conversion paths and completed goals. From this you can see where spikes in activity happen, the impact of local marketing activity, which media are driving the most traffic etc. In theory, they give you a pretty good picture of what's going on.

Don't blink

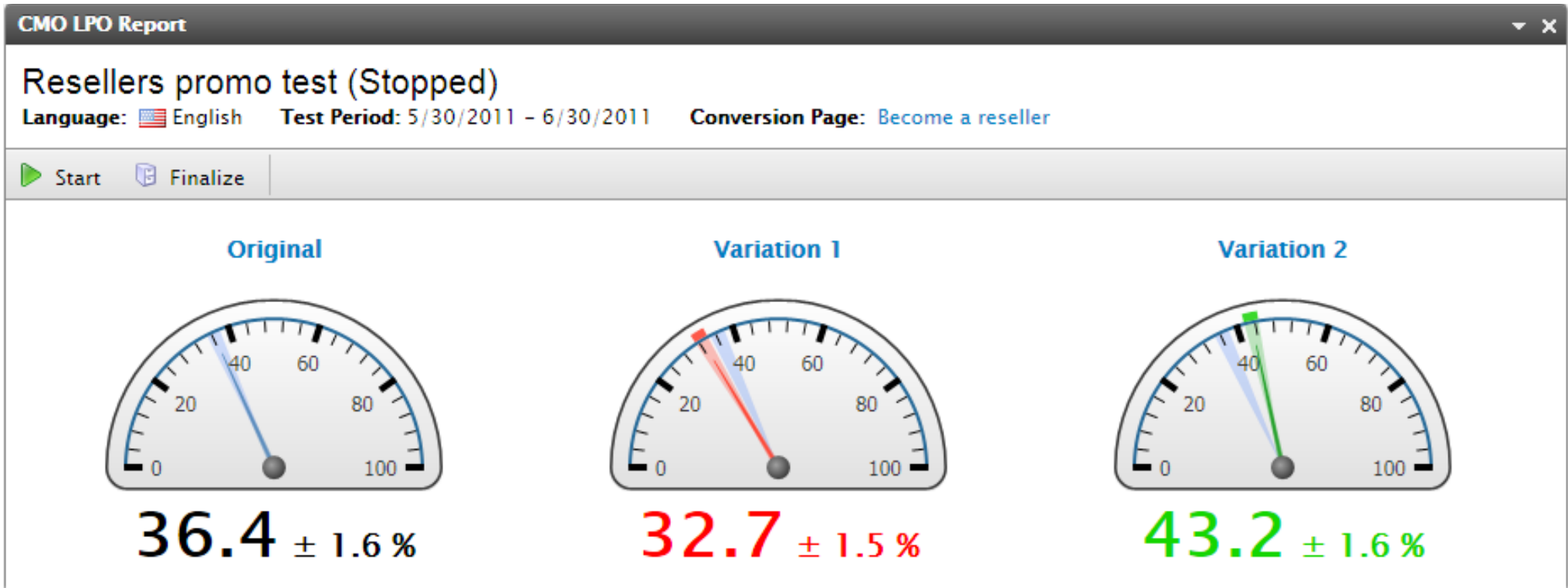
There is a problem, however. Analytics can be complex. As a result, all too often they are restricted simply to the people who understand how to use them. While this would appear reasonable enough, it can be a painfully slow process. It tends to lead to the results being shared only periodically. They become reactive. And changes in what gets measured are slow to implement.

More than this, those in charge of analytics are often not directly connected to the strategic marketing objectives of the organisation. And the analytics themselves offer information without insight. It means that those in charge of marketing either do not get what they need to make the best decisions for their company or do not understand what they are given.

The result is that opportunities get missed

In the real world, things move fast, you don't need us to tell you that. So anything that slows down your ability to deal with changing circumstances effectively cannot be good for your business. This is why in our own EPiServer CMO you can easily test your content, offer or service yourself. You receive the analytics you need to improve and decide what works.

But however you choose to do it, it's vital that the right information is available to the people who matter right when they need it. That way they can make the most of emerging opportunities (and just as importantly spot and deal with emerging threats). Of course, knowing what's happening is just the start, which brings us on to....



Step 2 – Where are you going?

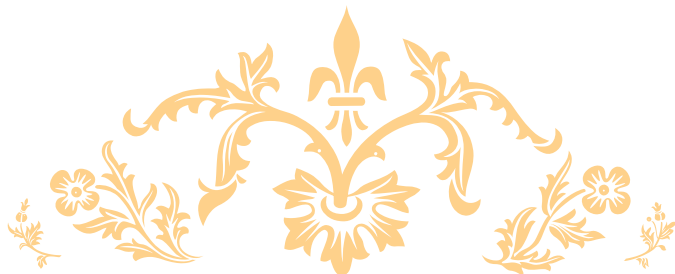
First, an interlude...

‘Cheshire Puss,’ Alice began... ‘Would you tell me, please, which way I ought to go from here?’

‘That depends a good deal on where you want to get to,’ said the Cat.

‘I don’t much care where—’ said Alice.

‘Then it doesn’t matter which way you go,’ said the Cat.



Alice’s encounter with the Cheshire Cat neatly sums up the problem of planning a website and making it work. Unless you know where you are going, you can’t begin to work out how to get there. And more than this, you’ll have great difficulty ever determining whether you have, in fact, finally got there or not.

Of course this is a great excuse for those who want to duck responsibility for the site’s success or failure. But for those of us who aspire to something more for their sites, getting the objectives right is pretty fundamental.

The first step is to clearly decide – and write down – what you are looking to achieve. What does success look like? This could be increased sales, lower costs, better engagement, higher downloads, more sign-ups, greater brand awareness of any number of other things.

The key is to be explicit about it (or them) and to be as focused as you can. If you have 15 objectives, chances are you’ll be just as lost as before. If you have three or less, you are in a much better place. Got it down to one? We salute you.

Measure the right stuff

The next thing is to work out how you'll know when you get there, when you've achieved your aims. This means determining what you are going to measure and the value each element has to your overall success. These are your key performance indicators (KPIs) and will form the backbone of your measurement activity. KPIs should be both achievable and measurable in a set period of time (not simply an open ended aspiration to greatness). And as with your overall goals, it is important not to measure everything – you'll end up overwhelmed by irrelevant data that will be more confusing than illuminating.

So, say you are selling products directly from your site. You may decide to measure overall traffic volumes, top referrers, the average value of each visitor, the most profitable pages, shopping cart abandonment rates and repeat buying levels among other things. If your objective is greater customer engagement you may instead select the number of comments on your blog, Facebook Likes, referrals, newsletter sign-ups, forum traffic and retweets etc.

As you can see, different objectives are intrinsically linked to the metrics you choose to measure. But unless you do measure performance, everything remains just subjective opinion.



Step 2 – Where are you going?

The funnel web

All sales are a process with a number of stages. For low cost habitual items, this maybe a case of going to the usual e-tailer, searching for the product by name and then buying. For high cost, considered purchases there may be many stages and people involved before a sale is finally made. At each stage there is an opportunity to move the customer on to the next. Conversely, there's also the danger of losing them altogether.

This is why we talk in terms of sales funnels. At the top of the funnel we attract as many relevant leads as possible. Then at each stage of the sale a certain percentage moves on, getting closer to the final purchase. Finally, a proportion of leads become paying customers.

Obviously, the more customers you can move through each stage, the more sales you will make.

How clear is your funnel?

The key, for the purposes of this step is to be clear about what each of the stages of your particular funnel are. That way you can look at the performance of each stage and plan how you can improve results.

For example, say we are selling software and have six stages to our funnel:

- 1 Outbound email marketing
- 2 Landing page
- 3 Demonstration video
- 4 Free trial
- 5 Time-limited offer
- 6 Sale



When we take a look at what's happening in our funnel, we see there's good traffic from our emails, people are watching the demo and downloading the free trial. But they're not converting to sales. This would indicate that perhaps our offer isn't as strong as it could be and that we need to create other incentives to convert people into customers.

While this example is a little simplistic, you get the point. By measuring and tracking each stage of the funnel we can begin to hone in on areas that are underperforming and take action to address any issues.

Finally, no site or campaign is static. Things change. Having a real-time view of how your funnels are performing will give you a clear picture of where you need to place more emphasis in your activity. It'll also enable you to act while there's still time to make a difference.

5 steps to smarter KPIs

For KPIs to be useful, they must be meaningful. So how do you ensure yours will do the job? Good question:

- They should be clearly linked to what matters to the business
- Wherever possible, they should be benchmarked against industry standards
- They should be SMART – specific, measurable, achievable, realistic and time-bound
- They should have sufficient budget and resource
- And they should be reviewed regularly and adjusted where necessary (but not simply to let yourself off the hook)

Step 3 – Testing Success

How do you know when a page is working? As we've already mentioned, one way is to see whether it is hitting or exceeding its KPIs. But how do you know whether there could be an even better way of achieving the results you want?

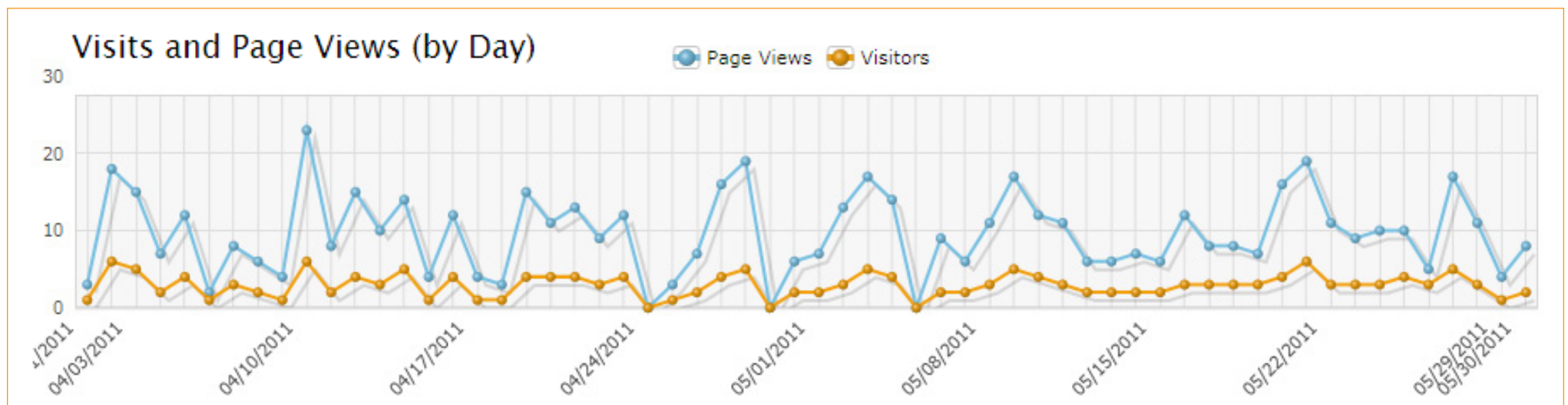
The answer lies in testing, and, in this case, A/B testing. For those that aren't aware of this approach, it means creating multiple similar pages and randomly serving them to visitors. Each page's performance is then assessed and the most effective is kept as the core page for future use (and for testing against new variants). It is, if you like, a form of survival of the fittest.

Typically, the changes between test pages are relatively minor. The trick is to isolate specific components (eg a banner, a button, a form) and assess how well it is performing versus an alternative.

But is it really worth it? Sure, they'll be some differences but will they be worth the time and effort involve in finding them? You'd be surprised.

Small changes, big effects

One of our favourite sites on A/B testing is Anne Holland's Which Test Won? It provides a fascinating (and valuable) insight into how small changes in design, structure and wording can indeed have big effects.



And when we say big:

- Changes in form structure have delivered over 50% increases in sign-ups
- Changes in copy have resulted in over 250% more first time customers
- And changes in design have meant an increase of over 1,000% in clickthroughs

[Source for stats: <http://whichtestwon.com/past-tests>]

So as you can see, it pays to test. (And, if you'll excuse the shameless plug, with the tools built in to EPiServer CMO, A/B testing has never been easier.)

There are many elements you can test:

- Layouts
- Button text
- Long content vs short content
- Offers
- Imagery
- Forms



The options go on and on. With each, you can select an alternative to test and serve it to a proportion of your visitors (you choose how many). After a period of time you analyse how each option performed and keep the best performer as your new default option.

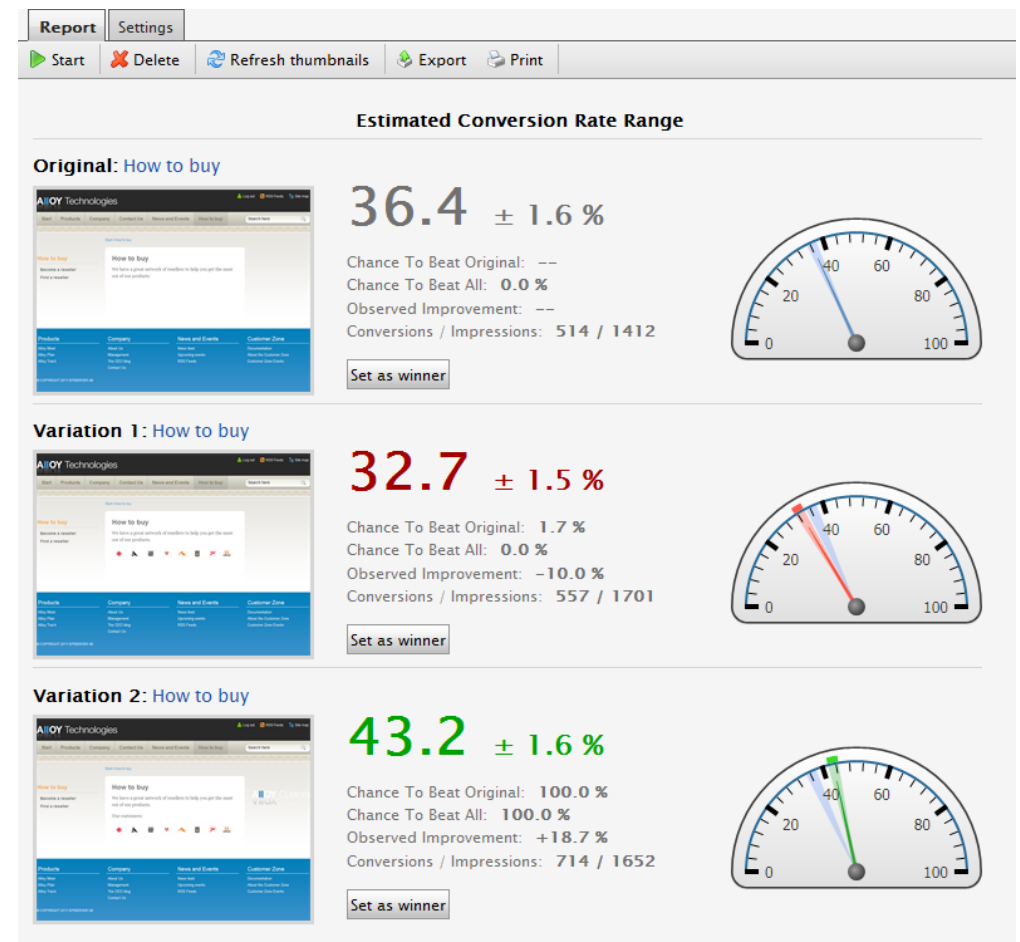
So, as you can see, ultimately, this is about continuously tuning your site to deliver the best results possible for your business.

What should you test?

The options for testing are almost limitless as we've already pointed out but some factors have more influence on success than others.

- Form pages – simpler tends to be better (and deliver far higher responses)
- Headlines (and subject lines for emails) – test talking about the product, the offer and the customer. Test questions against statements against testimonial quotes
- Calls to action – clear directions, higher in the page tend to work harder. Test the wording, position and even colour of your calls to action
- Offers – are your customers incentivised by your offer? Is there a better alternative?
- Page layout – test whether you need to go simpler or richer; test the hierarchy of messages within the design
- Personalization – instead of delivering the same we experience to every visitor; test to adapt parts of your content for your visitors. Giving them a more relevant web experience.

Remember, this is just the start but it's your chance to try for quick wins first. From here you can expand out from the core to analyse, for example, which channels are driving the most profitable traffic and delivering the best leads. The result will be a site which is continually fine-tuned to deliver ever-improving results.



Bringing it all together

Every website is different. What constitutes success for one may well be irrelevant to another. But one thing they all have in common is the need to generate value for the business as a whole.

If we've communicated anything in this ebook, we hope it's that you need to be clear about what success looks like for your site. Beyond this you need ways to track and measure that success over time – ways that give you the information you need in as near real time as possible. And finally that you must be able to quickly and easily test alternatives that could offer even better results.

That's why we've built all these features into EPiServer Campaign Monitor and Optimisation (CMO). The benefits include:

1

Real-time monitoring and reporting on your campaigns.

2

Conversion path monitoring to show how your sales funnel is performing.

3

Key performance indicators (KPIs) allowing you to set targets, assign budgets and determine success.

4

And a landing page optimiser where you can quickly and easily set up A/B tests on any of your landing pages.

With EPiServer CMO you get all the information you need on a powerful, easy to navigate dashboard. This means you no longer need your technical gods to put something together for you (or decipher what it is you're actually seeing). And because CMO places the entire process within your control – from analytics to KPIs to testing – you can take advantage of opportunities faster, creating a more successful site for your business.

We would love to show you how EPiServer CMO could help you make your website more successful. You can watch an overview video here and download product details here. Alternatively, for a full demonstration of the product, contact us using the contact information below and we'll be happy to help.

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We look forward to hearing from you.

About EPiServer

EPiServer is the leading supplier of solutions that enable true web engagement and drive business results for end customers. Over 3,500 customers worldwide use EPiServer's technology platform that combines content, community, commerce and communications with a configurable metrics dashboard. EPiServer CMS is the foundation for more than 10,000 websites and is used by more than 130,000 web editors daily. The EPiServer platform is delivered through an extensive network of over 500 partner companies in 30 countries.

Learn more at www.episerver.com