Article Side

Some great tips that can come handy for Drupal amateurs by Valuebound

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Drupal is a great CMS to handle every kind of websites and any kind of website requirements. Itâ€™s such a platform that allows one to develop a unique website with customized functionality to suit business requirements. In this article, we will share some simple tips and tricks aimed to provide some help to the new Drupal developers.

Introduction

Firstly, you havenâ€™t already considered to go through the official Drupal.org reference on core concepts before plunging into Drupal development, then you should do that immediately.

One more place to find good help is the Drupal Forums; you can do a search to find the specific solution to your specific query. You can also use some of these tips for posting to the Drupal forums.

While Drupal is not for everyone, it is a popular platform that helps accomplish many common goals for website owners.

Now, here are some tips to help Drupal newbies:

1. Installing Drupal Quickly Using Profiles

Drupal comes in the "core" format as a standard download from the official Drupal.org website, you can click the "Download" button on the Download page at Drupal.org for the most recent version.

But in case you have a particular requirement such as a news site, or a campaign site, then consider using one of the contributed profiles or distributions that have been built from thousands of hours of development time from other coders. These pre-configured packages have such modules, themes, or pre-built functions that let you to create your site and get it running in no time at all. And you get to do this without you having to physically download and configure multiple modules to extend Drupal core.

We use the Acquia distribution, which comes with many modules for a pretty complex website which has moderate to high functionality.

2. User 1 Account Details

Do keep in mind to care to record the username, password, and e-mail address of the first user, that is usually the admin username. This is very important as this is the user number 1, the owner of the site, and youâ€™ll have to periodically return and log in as this first user to keep the update the website. Itâ€™s also important to secure this account details because it holds a lot of controll over your Drupal installation.

3. Knowledge of the Basic URL Structure for Drupal Content

After you have a basic installation in place, you can choose to create new content by navigating directly to this URL (where example.com is your domain name):

http://example.com/node/add

The content within a Drupal site are called nodes. Now, a node can be anything from an image, to a page, a story, an announcement, a poll, a web form, or a job listing, you may think of a node as a single unit of content. For instance, if you want to create a new page, you can go to the following URL:

http://example.com/node/add/page

After you have created a content, you can find its nid (node ID), which is a unique identifier for that node, in the URL. To locate the nid through the URL of a web page, just use the following URL structure as a guide, where [nid] is the node ID of that page:

http://example.com/node/[nid]

Check that in the following image, the nid is 2.

4. Google it to find/know it

Itâ€™s quite possible that right from the beginning you are having installation errors, mostly because your local development environment, that is your installation of Drupal in your computer, may be different from your remote hosting environment, which is where your Drupal site will be hosted.

However, fear not! Coz whenever you face a Drupal issue, then you can fall back on Google as if itâ€™s your best friend. Just copy and paste the exact error message, and do consider putting the search term inside double quotes so that Google does a literal search.

5. Customize Your Siteâ€™s Error Pages

There are default error messages that Drupal gives your users when they navigate to a web page that they donâ€™t have permission to view or a page that is not found, and this can be really intimidating and not actually useful. Consider configuring the language of your 403 Access Denied and 404 Page through this URL:

http://example.com/admin/settings/error-reporting

6. Troubleshooting the menacing "White Screen of Death"

Now, this might seem pretty scary, when you try to navigate to your Drupal site and you see nothing but a white blank screen. This is mockingly nicknamed white screen of death, and it usually means that Drupal encountered a PHP error. Several things may cause this, and it usually has to do with a development error. Something as small as even missing a semicolon can trigger off the white screen of death.

In case you find yourself facing a completely white screen, then you will want to enable PHP error reporting, so that you can find where the issue is being encountered. For more information, please refer to this Drupal.org tutorial called White Screen of Death.

7. Installing the Administrator Menu Module

If you have not used an installation profile and if you are not using Drupal 7, then it is good to install the Administration menu module (admin_menu).

It is a dropdown menu at the very top of the administration pages that links to admin pages, making it easier to find your way through the maze-like administration pages.

8. Keeping Back Up of Your Database in a Safe Location

The Backup and Migrate module is the suitable choice for grabbing an SQL dump of your database

for storage or if you are required to move it from one host to another. We strongly recommend storing these backups on a separate location of your site, to be on the safer side. For small sites, you may even get away with emailing the SQL file to yourself and storing it there. However, it is not recommended for security purposes, since if your email account is compromised, and it can get your siteâ€™s content be exposed, but we are just suggesting the types of places you can store your SQL files.

9. Something Goes Wrong, Consider Flushing Your Cache

By default Drupal creates caches of your content so that every time a page is requested, it doesnâ€™t have to generate it dynamically all of the time, reducing the amount of PHP processes and SQL queries being made, which in turn increases the performance of your Drupal site.

But, if your site acting weird or you canâ€™t see your theme edits during development, then use the Flush Cache function. Flushing your cache clears out your Drupal cache and allows the site to rebuild itself with updated information.

You can also choose to disable the Drupal cache temporarily while youâ€™re still in development under the Site Configuration page, under Performance.

10. Explaining the Concept of Content Types to Clients Helps

One of the most crucial and very difficult thing for your client is to understand the different types of content on their site. If you look at it from the perspective of the end-user, a page of staff biographies, a page of announcements, a page of recent events may seem to all behave in the same way. So, it might be difficult, for instance, to explain why a Story is different from a Page.

But in order to get the end-users to really use their system properly, this conversation needs to happen while handing over the project.

One thing to note is that they can create new types of content by going to Administer > Content types > Add content type (tab).

From Drupalâ€™s point of view, breaking down the site into unique content types, the site owner can easily make flowing changes for one content type. You could, for instance, change commenting settings for a Page that would be different for a Story.

Each of the different nodes within a specific content type may then be displayed on the front-facing sections of the Drupal site using Views (more on this later).

By figuring out what kinds of content will be used on the site, you can create "content types" to match. When you do the initial discovery phase with your client, ensure that you help them break down all the content that they want on their site into specific "content types."

11. Understanding User Roles and Permissions

After you get the hang of all the modules youâ€™ll be using, as well as the content types, then you may choose to specify what types of users ("roles") youâ€™ll have on the site and which permissions those roles have.

You can configure user permissions via:

http://example.com/admin/user/permissions

The default Drupal user roles are as follows:

anonymous user â€“ a user that is not logged in

authenticated user â€“ a user that is logged in and has an account on your Drupal site

admin user â€“ a user that is logged in, has an account on your Drupal site, and has rights to administer the website

12. Understanding the Basic Theme Development Concepts

There are numerous of themes available for free download, paid download, or for unique customization from a design comp created by your web designer. If we are doing a custom theme, then we usually use a modified version of the Framework Theme as a base, with all additional graphic design elements (PNGs, backgrounds, icons, photos and logos) coming from Photoshop and with CSS edits directly to the stylesheet.

Note that a theme is made up of these following major parts:

*.info â€“ has information about the different regions of the page; consider adding new sections such as a "Content Top" section or a "Bottom Footer" section if needed

page.tpl.php â€“ the default template for pages

node.tpl.php â€“ the default template for how a specific node will display; custom nodes can be created by creating a file using the following naming convention: node-[nodename].tpl.php (e.g. node-blog.tpl.php or node-product.tpl.php)

template.php â€“ pulls the layout together and calls different functions into the overall layout of each page

style.css â€“ all custom CSS for the site

There may also be some additional *.php files such as block.php and/or comment.php, if you or the theme designer decide to specify the layout of those elements.

13. Itâ€™s Good To Know Some Places for Getting Free Themes

Every now and then your client will be able to find a theme that fits most of their needs, and you can do additional customizations to the CSS. If they would like to download public themes, we usually encourage clients to visit the following links.

Free Themes:

http://themegarden.org/drupal6/

http://drupal.org/project/Themes

http://drupal2u.com/

Premium Themes:

http://www.cmsquickstart.com/drupal-themes

http://fusiondrupalthemes.com/browse

14. Know How to Install a Downloaded Theme

To enable a downloaded theme, first move the unpacked file into a new directory:

/sites/all/themes/[themedirectoryname]

Next, choose your theme from Administer > Site Building > Themes or by navigating directly to this URL:

http://example.com/admin/build/themes/select

Choose which theme you would like as the Default and which ones you would like to have Enabled. If a theme is Enabled, it means it can be set as the Default.

15. Keep in Mind to Set Up Basic Site Information

Some standard information gets collected and displayed on your basic Drupal setup, such as the name of the website, the e-mail address for any system messages, the slogan, mission statement, and text in the footer message.

This information can then be called using the Drupal API in case you need to print them out on certain Drupal pages.

You can set and view these through Admin > Site configuration > Site information or by navigating directly to this URL:

http://example.com/admin/settings/site-information

16. Remember to Always Set Up Clean URLs

Drupal, by default, uses not so friendly system URLs to refer to your web pages. For instance, navigating to a page may look like this: http://example.com/?q=node/1. Not very user-friendly or indicative of what the content is. It is also not very good for SEO.

To solve this issue, enable Clean URLs by going to Administer > Site configuration > Clean URLs or navigating directly to the following URL:

http://example.com/admin/settings/clean-urls

17. Installing a WYSIWYG Module

Your clients will demand an interface that allows them to compose their content easily and without knowledge of coding. Creating content should be as easy as writing and sending an email. There should be a GUI for doing things like bolding, italicizing, underlining text, creating bulleted lists, creating hyperlinked text, and so forth. We are recommending the CKEditor module for handling WYSIWYG functionality. It is the successor of the popular FCKEditor. Try out the demo and read the projectâ€™s documentation for more info.

CKEditor comes in two parts:

A "wrapper" module: CKEditor for Drupal

The main required component, which you can download directly from the CKEditor website

18. Deploying a Contact Form

Almost all of our clients require some sort of web form, and itâ€™s usually going to be a contact form for their site users to be able to message them. Drupal core has a pre-built contact form, and itâ€™s best to enable it and make necessary changes to it, prior to deploying the Drupal site.

Firstly, you must enable the Contact module, which is an optional core module. Then, to configure

the contact form, go to Administer > Site Building > Contact Form or navigate directly to:

http://example.com/admin/build/contact

Please note that you may have to edit many parts of the contact form, such as the different types of contact form categories available and different addresses to send a message, depending on its category. This could be very useful for multi-user sites, where you can have a category regarding advertising forwarded to the sales team and a question about technical support forwarded to the IT guys.

19. Managing Your Navigation Menus

Drupal comes pre-configured with these three menu blocks as follows:

Navigation links â€“ provided by Drupal and the main interactive menu with personalized links

Primary links â€“ major sections of the site, typically like the tabs across the top of the page

Secondary links â€“ an additional set of links for items like legal notices, contact details and other less-important navigational elements

You may manually edit these menus by using your Menu manager via Administer > Site building > Menus > List menus or navigating directly to:

http://example.com/admin/build/menu/list

Alternatively, you can add a new node, and from the data entry page, you may add that new node directly to the menu: just specify the desired menu and the text to appear within that menu.

20. Learn to Work with Views

Using Views gives you an awesome amount of control over the tedious task of creating displays of your information. Using the Views editor, you can filter your available nodes and publish them in various styles such as tables, grids, or lists, and sort them in the manner of your choosing.

For instance, from a content type of "people", you can use Views to specify any of the following from the same set of records:

A grid of faces that is an additional "block" to be placed on a Team page

An alphabetical list by name and department on a Departments page

An office-only list of e-mails and phone numbers on an Administration page

We recommend that you read this tutorial called A Beginners Guide to Using Views for better understanding. Also, the Getting Started with Drupal: A Comprehensive Hands-On Guide walks you through the creation of a view.

Conclusion

There is actually lot of things to cover and to get accustomed to when youâ€™re first getting to start using Drupal. All of these canâ€™t be really covered in one article. Just try and figure out the types of functions that seem to match the ones that your clients have asked for, and then find a set of well-supported to use for deploying content management systems. Drupal is extremely powerful and the things it can do are limitless, thus getting to know about it all might require some time. But once you have clear basic ideas, then you may just plunge into it and figure it all as you work through it. Enjoy doing the great stuff that Drupal lets you do!

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