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Compass Guide to WCM, Q1 2012

Evaluation of Ektron

By: Tony White



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Ektron 8.5 Product Evaluation

By: Tony White

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ARS LOGICA

ARS LOGICA POSITION

A key player in the WCM market for many years, Ektron has recently improved and expanded its product line into a true enterprise-grade platform, now producing one of the highest quality WCM-Marketing-eCommerce solutions on the market. Meaningful product differentiation began in 2009 with significant usability enhancements for content authors (v. 8.0), continued in 2010 with robust online sales and marketing tools for non-technical marketers (v. 8.0), and concluded in 2011 with a major upgrade of the development environment for coders (v. 8.5). Ektron 8.5 is currently near best-of-breed status in all of the major WCM functional categories.

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 always independently verified through customer interviews, implementation monitoring, Ars Logica's comprehensive knowledge base, and hands-on product testing.

Hands-On Product Testing

Ars Logica conducted hands-on product testing of v. 8.0 in January 2010 at Ektron's headquarters in Nashua, New Hampshire; remote testing of v. 8.5 was performed in December 2011.

Customer Interviews

Ars Logica interviewed users of every product covered in the Compass Guide, including Ektron.

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.

Ektron Vendor Overview

Ektron produces a full-featured, .NET-based, CMS-eCommerce platform. Until recently, Ektron's products were aimed at the mid-market, but in the last three years, the vendor has significantly improved the feature-functionality, scalability, and flexibility of its offerings. As a result, Ektron's products are now well-suited both to midsize and large enterprises seeking an integrated WCM-eCommerce suite. Ektron's installed base is primarily North American, but the vendor has also recently garnered significant attention in Europe and Australia. Ektron's once-troubled channel strategy has now been put on solid footing, resolving any lingering questions about product or vendor viability. Ektron currently ranks as one of the few top-tier .NET-focused CMS vendors.

Company Profile

Year Founded: 1998
Headquarters: Nashua, New Hampshire
Employees (or FTE equivalents): 280
Geographies: Global
Revenue: \$45 million (est.)
Product Types Offered: CMS/WCM, eCommerce
Commercial or Open Source: Commercial
Strategic Implementation Partners: Razorfish, Perficient, iCrossing, VML, Syscom
Top Competitors: Adobe/Day Software, Sitecore, SDL Tridion
Key Vertical Industries: Education, Healthcare, Manufacturing

Product Profile

Product Name: Ektron 8.5 (recently changed from CMS 400.NET)
Version: 8.5
Next version release date: End of Q1 2012
Market segment: Enterprise
Average Sales Price (License Only): \$100,000
Technology Platform: .NET
Key Strengths: Online marketing capabilities, native .NET platform, mass content deployment and synchronization, social computing features
Key Limitations: Not the best fit in non-Microsoft environments
Highest-Value Use Case: Departmental or enterprise deployment with significant online marketing, sales, and social computing requirements

Vendor History & Product Evolution

Ektron began as a producer of WYSIWYG editors (also known as rich-text editors) that were OEM'd into most of the market-leading WCM solutions in the late 1990s, notably including Interwoven and Vignette. By 2002-2003, Ektron had begun supplementing its rich-text editor with features and functions usually available only in more complete WCM offerings. At that point, it began challenging entry-level and mid-tier – but full-fledged – WCM products on the market. Ektron's product evolution continued such that by 2006-2007, it was a leader in the mid-market.

In 2009, we witnessed the first steps of Ektron's entrance into the enterprise WCM market with v. 8.0. With v. 8.5 in 2011, we see a product that is fully competitive at the enterprise tier of the market. To provide more context, Ektron substantially improved its SEO capabilities in the 7.5 version. In conjunction with better native analytics, the important search-oriented improvements of v. 7.5 laid the groundwork for the enterprise-grade functionality in the 8.x versions. For the post-7.x versions, Ektron had a three-stage development strategy, which dedicated 2009 to improved ease-of-use across the entire product line (specifically aimed at content authors). In 2010, development focus was on the marketer, and Ektron introduced the Marketing Optimization Suite, which included multivariate testing, content targeting, e-commerce capabilities, and inline context analytics. Finally, 2011 has been the year of the developer, and the vendor has completely overhauled its development environment, including its "Framework API," which significantly reduces the amount of custom coding required from IT. We have seen use cases where 100 lines of required XSL have been replaced by 5-6 lines of "Framework API" code. This is an extreme example, but it gives a glimpse of the order-of-magnitude reductions in necessary coding. Also important in the 8.5 release is the Microsoft search architecture, which includes a robust FAST enterprise search pre-integration. And while many companies will not need it, 8.5's true three-tier architecture significantly improves the platform's performance, especially in terms of flexibility and scalability. Finally, users will welcome the disappearance of the ubiquitous "Ektron blue and orange" in the new, simpler, more elegant, "Apple-like" UI.

Key Recent Developments

The developer-focused improvements in v. 8.5 are too numerous to describe in-depth here. But first, and briefly, coding within the "Ektron.Cms.Framework" is dramatically simpler and more consistent. For example, statements and commands for managing data, content, folder, and object classes are nearly identical. Next, there are dozens of useful "Managers" for controlling functional parts of the application, such as TaxonomyManager, MenuManager, FolderManager, CollectionManager, et al. In v. 8.5, Ektron has introduced templated server controls that use MVC for better separation of content from presentation logic. And finally, the new search architecture is based on Microsoft Search Server, which provides a wealth of benefits, not least of which are true cross-application federated search capabilities.

Profiling the Ideal Buyer

The ideal buyer of Ektron 8.5 is a midsize to large enterprise seeking a highly flexible, scalable, .NET-based WCM-eCommerce platform. Ektron's offerings will be of particular interest to those seeking to leverage Microsoft's new Framework API, Ektron's tight integration with Microsoft's FAST enterprise search products, and the availability of new sales and marketing tools (which allow non-technical marketers to analyze website visitors' user activity and make high-impact changes to marketing campaigns). The developer-focused changes in version 8.5 of the product bring the platform's flexibility and scalability to a near market-leading position. In sum, these improvements, combined with the functional updates aimed at content authors and marketers from v. 8.0, will make Ektron a natural vendor to shortlist for many large enterprises with .NET development standards.

- **Midsize to Large Enterprises with .NET Development Environments**

There are fewer than half a dozen enterprise-grade .NET CMS platforms on the market. Ektron is one of them.

- **Enterprises with Robust Search, E-Commerce, and Marketing Campaign Requirements**

Improvements in these functional areas in the 7.5+ versions of the platform make it a good fit for many midsize or large enterprises seeking a .NET-based CMS with robust federated search, SEO, B2B/B2C e-commerce, and marketing campaign management capabilities.

- **Companies that Rely Heavily on Non-Technical Editorial and Marketing Resources**

One of the real strengths of the current platform is the enablement of non-technical content authors and marketing resources to perform many of the tasks that formerly required technical marketing and IT involvement.

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

Because of the dramatic increase in the sophistication of the product in the last three years, Ektron is now overkill for small implementations, and even for large ones with mostly static content. While the platform boasts rich WCM functionality, differentiation from other good WCM products stems from its search, SEO, e-commerce, and marketing campaign management functionality. Companies not seeking these additional feature sets will likely be able to find less expensive solutions. And finally, Ektron generally presents a higher value proposition in .NET infrastructures than in Java or PHP-based ones. This is not to say that Ektron 8.5 cannot be integrated into heterogeneous technical environments -- indeed it can. But the feature/benefit-to-cost ratio is higher when .NET development standards can be leveraged across enterprise applications.

Key Product Strengths

Ektron has been a key player in the WCM market for more than a decade. Until 2009, however, the vendor’s products did not reach true enterprise-grade performance. The last three years, however, have seen dramatic improvements. Currently, Ektron 8.5’s key product strengths are the value-adding feature-functions and product modules – namely robust analytics, social computing, e-commerce, and marketing campaign management – that serve as the primary differentiators in a crowded WCM market.

With the launch of v. 8.0 in 2009, Ektron dramatically improved the user experience for content managers, added respectable tools for the management of mobile sites, and introduced robust support for social computing. 2010 witnessed dramatic improvements in the product suite for marketers, including multivariate testing, content targeting, inline content analytics, and the introduction of an e-commerce module. 2011 was the year of the developer at Ektron, v. 8.5 witnessing an extraordinary transformation in its product architecture (now three-tier) along with a completely revamped development environment, which Ektron calls “Framework API” (as does Microsoft). The most important results? A dramatic reduction (sometimes 90%) in the amount of required coding from IT; and a simplified, consistent way of managing content classes (data, folders, objects, etc.). In short, 2009, 2010, and 2011 improved and expanded the product’s capabilities for content managers, marketers, and developers, respectively. Ektron is currently at or near best-of-breed in all of WCM’s functional areas.

FIGURE 1 Ektron 8.5, 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

Robust online marketing capabilities in the Marketing Optimization Suite
Native .NET platform with best-of-breed development tools (“Framework API”)
Excellent usability
Among the most complete of WCM-marketing-e-commerce suites

KEY LIMITATIONS

Legacy of channel conflict with its integration partners (problem now largely solved)
Poor fit for non-Microsoft IT environments
Only recently-proven large enterprise scalability

Source: Ars Logica, Inc.

Source of Information: Product testing (December 2011), customer interviews, Vendor Questionnaire

Key Product Limitations

The largest concern by far for anybody in-the-know in the WCM industry over the past several years has been Ektron's competition with its own channel partners. We have witnessed this time and time again, and we have interviewed some of Ektron's close partners who confirmed the (in the partners' eyes) unfair competition. Although prospective customers may have had no way of knowing about this situation, it was common knowledge among analysts and system integrators. Ars Logica has had a high opinion of Ektron's products for quite some time, but we were very concerned about what this channel conflict implied for Ektron's long-term product and corporate viability. After recently speaking at length with quite a few of Ektron's partners, along with Ektron itself, we are happy to report that – as far as we can tell – this problem has been successfully resolved. Unfortunately, given the nature of the software industry, rumors about the problem will likely live on for quite some time. We think the resolution of this problem deserves special attention, because rarely have we seen such a serious problem be resolved in less than a year. We are fairly sure that the problem is gone, as we have independent and consistent confirmation of this from those who used to complain most bitterly. We hope that the vendor gets the credit it deserves for tackling the problem.

As you may surmise from the product's former name (CMS 400.NET), Ektron 8.5 will be a poor fit for *some* non-Microsoft-centric IT environments. Not only have the products been built on Microsoft technologies, .NET development standards are woven through the fabric of the entire platform. That said, Ektron's recent success in large enterprise deployments has placed the product in heterogeneous environments where extensive application integration is often the norm for any newly-acquired software products. Thus, for midsize to large companies that wish to leverage overwhelmingly Microsoft-centric internal IT resources (or Microsoft-centric system integrators with whom they have strong relationships), Ektron is an obvious potential CMS solution. But for large enterprises that are *not* explicit or *de facto* Microsoft shops, Ektron may also be a potential solution if the enterprise infrastructure already includes a bit of everything (Java, .NET, PHP, et al.) – i.e. if there is not a commitment to a single development standard.

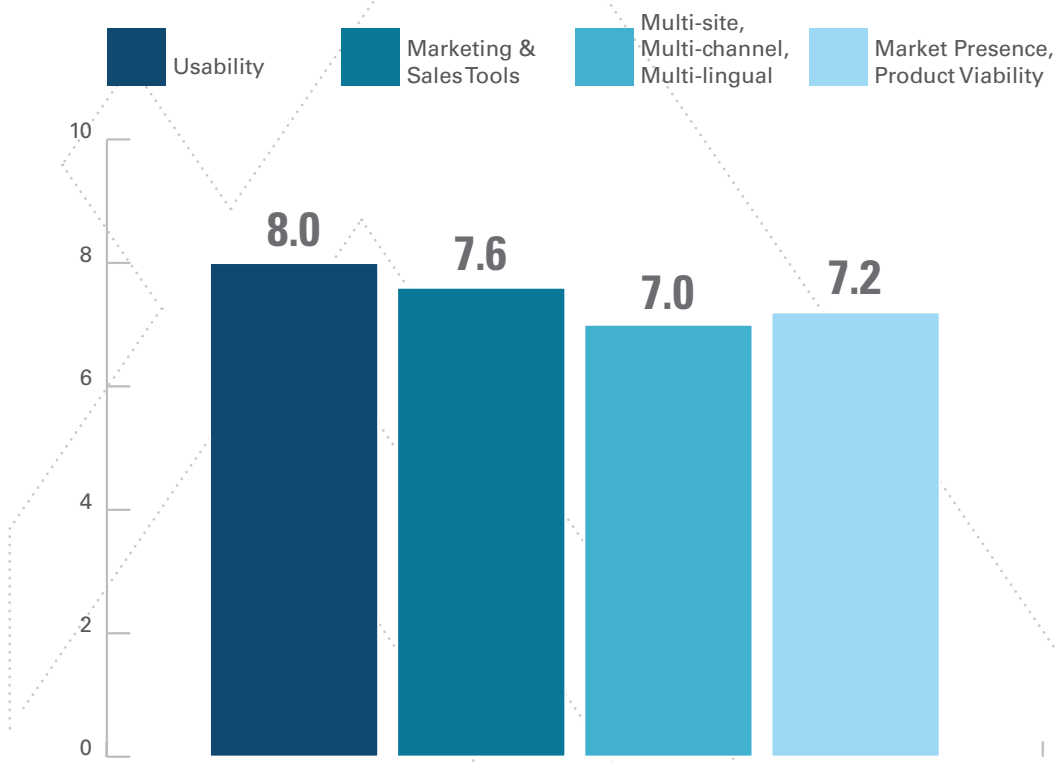
The last significant limitation of Ektron is that, since the platform has until recently been targeted primarily at mid-sized implementations, its track record for high scalability is fairly short. That said, Ektron has enjoyed considerable recent success in a range of large-enterprise implementations. So we believe that “lacking the last bit of enterprise scalability” should not be a real concern. Of course, there are other vendors with much longer track records of high scalability whose professional services organizations and implementation partners have more experience in deploying the largest of global websites. Our recommendation for large-enterprise buyers is to check Ektron enterprise references who have implemented use cases similar to their own for implementation risk/success factors.

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). For example, a Scalability score of 9 for an "Enterprise" product does not equate to the same score for an "Entry Level" product.

FIGURE 2 Ektron Report Card for the Business User

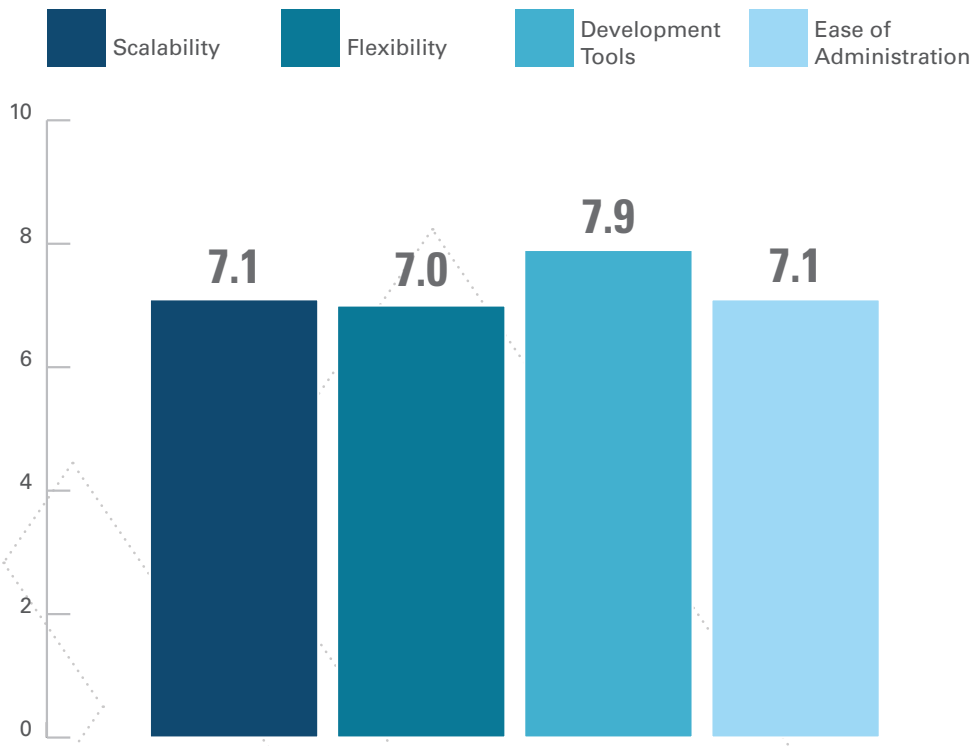
Figure 2 shows Ars Logica's rating of Ektron 8.5 in four categories of critical importance to business users. Refer to Page 11 for an explanation of the evaluation criteria.



Source of Information: Product testing (December 2011), customer interviews, Vendor Questionnaire

FIGURE 3 Ektron Report Card for Technologists

Figure 3 shows Ars Logica's rating of Ektron 8.5 in four categories of critical importance to technologists. Refer to Page 12 for an explanation of the evaluation criteria.



Source of Information: Product testing (December 2011), 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 – not as a substitute for painstaking requirements and product matching.

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

Ars Logica is a vendor-neutral analyst firm helping companies evaluate their WCM requirements and select appropriate WCM software. 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 the year is not limited.

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 the 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 present our view of the WCM market at industry conferences and end-user events.

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