Chapter 1

The Big Picture

In This Chapter

- Understanding open source software
- Comparing Content Management Systems
- Developing a Web site with Drupal
- Knowing Drupal's potential

In the past, if you wanted to create a fully featured Web site with forms, a blog, and a message board, you practically had to be a computer programmer. You needed to know how to write HTML and possibly JavaScript and CSS, and to accomplish anything dynamic, yet another language such as PHP or ASP. You probably would have needed to know SQL, the language that allows Web sites to store and retrieve information.

Over the years, Web developers began freely sharing code. If you knew some HTML and a few other things, you could use the work of other people to knit your site together. No longer did you need to write code every time you wanted a contact form or poll or image library on your Web site.

Today, we have entire robust and powerful Web applications, supported by communities of Web developers. Enter Drupal. Drupal is one of a class of applications that do nearly all the work for you. You can build a site with Drupal without ever writing a line of code. Indeed, that is the ultimate goal of Drupal: to free you from the inner workings of the code and instead let you focus on the layout and content of your site. There are other, similar applications you can use that also accomplish this, but Drupal is one of the best open source applications for quick, code-free Web site creation.

Before I get into the installation and use of Drupal, I think it's helpful to start by introducing the features of Drupal. The more you understand about what Drupal is, the better you can plan and use it to your advantage.

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What Drupal Is

The official Drupal Web site, `http://drupal.org`, describes Drupal as "a free software package that allows an individual or a community of users to easily publish, manage and organize a wide variety of content on a website." This is a great description of this application. It's free, as long as you follow certain rules that I mention later in this chapter. Drupal allows for a wide variety of content, making it extremely flexible and customizable. The fact that more than one individual can publish and manage content makes it a Content Management System, or CMS. I explain each of these important characteristics of Drupal in more detail.

Free

Drupal is distributed as *open source* software. This means that you can get a copy of the program and install it on your Web server, modify the appearance of the pages and layout to suit your needs, and add your content to it without paying for the program. It seems too good to be true!

Software designated as open source essentially means it's "free," but it does have certain legal obligations associated with it. If you were a programmer and made changes to the code itself and then provided the new code to other people, there would be certain rules you would have to follow under Drupal's license. You can learn more about it here: `http://www.gnu.org/copyleft/gpl.html`.

If you really like Drupal or the great Drupal site you build helps your company make lots of money, you can contribute to the efforts of the many great programmers who have created this software by visiting `http://drupal.org/contribute`.

Flexible

Drupal sites are completely flexible. This means you can do things like:

- **Modify the layout of your pages:** With the use of blocks, you can move your navigation links to the side, top, or anywhere else on your pages you wish. You can put all your content in one column or choose multiple-column layouts.
- **Remove or replace the default Drupal logo:** By default, your Drupal site will have the official Drupal logo. You can easily remove it or replace it with your own logo.

- **Add and remove pages:** Drupal wouldn't be of much use to you if you were stuck with a specific set of pages. Drupal gives you complete flexibility to create as many pages as your site will need, as well as freedom to choose where page links will appear.
- **Hide content and pages from certain users:** You can, if you choose, allow only logged-in users or even a subset of users to see certain pages on your site. You can even hide content *within* a page from certain users.
- **Allow users to choose their own layout:** You can let individual users choose their own layouts. When they log in, they will see the layout they chose.

Customizable

One of the best things about Drupal is the ease with which you can customize your site features. Drupal comes with lots of great features you can turn on with the click of a button. If you want a forum or a poll or a blog, for example, it comes with the Drupal application and you can easily include or exclude it in your site. Your site can contain precisely what you want it to, and you can turn off features you don't want.

Beyond the features, or modules, included with the program, many Web developers have created and made freely available to you *thousands* more modules you can download and install! I recommend you take a minute to check out the third-party modules here: `http://drupal.org/project/modules`. Some great add-ons are in there. If you aren't already excited about the potential Drupal offers, you will be. For example, free modules allow you to integrate Facebook and Twitter information into your site, turn your site into an online store, or create photo galleries. I tell you about some especially useful and interesting third-party modules later in this book.

Content Management System

At its heart, Drupal is all about *managing content.* Drupal belongs to a class of applications known as Web *Content Management Systems* (CMS). These applications are designed to separate the content on a Web site from the presentation of that content. In other words, you can manage the text and graphics on your site through the Drupal interface as easily as you can create a Microsoft Word document.

After you set your site up, you don't have to worry about looking at HTML code and putting your desired text into some sort of Web format. You can simply type in a text box on a form and press a button. Your new content will

show up on your site. Behind the scenes, Drupal handles the conversion of your text into a format viewable on the Web. Drupal will also, in the case of a blog style page, save any old content previously published and provide a link to it for your users.

But the real power of CMS applications is that you can give specific users the permission to easily post, edit, and/or delete content on your site, without having permission to change the layout or features of your site. You can even allow certain users to create content, but not allow it to be published on the site until you've had a chance to approve it. All of this control allows your site content to be maintained, while your site structure remains safe from possible harm.

What Drupal Isn't

Drupal is a great application for creating a robust CMS Web site. But it's not perfect. You may encounter a few difficulties as you work with it:

- **Drupal isn't so easy to install:** Probably the most difficult part of building a Drupal Web site is installing Drupal in the first place. You have to understand its requirements, make a few decisions, and gather required information to get it installed correctly.

  Chapter 2 covers the ins and outs of installation.

- **Your site isn't automatically ready to go after you finish installing Drupal:** You will be modifying the configuration of the site, changing the layout, and adding your own content. You will also need to spend time deciding on the best site structure for your Web site.

  I show you how to customize your site in great detail in Part II.

- **You have limited ability to change the appearance or function of modules:** Any modules you use will have some configurable options, but there may be things you want to change that aren't configurable. This is the case with any of the open source CMS applications you will encounter and isn't simply a limitation of Drupal. The developers of modules generally do their best to anticipate what you might want to configure, but they can't read your mind. Fortunately, because of the beauty of open source, you have the code and your specific needs can be addressed.

  I don't discuss programming in this book, but after you get your site running, you may want to learn more about the code side of Drupal. In Chapter 17, I recommend some sites where you can get programming help as you delve into the messy business of modifying the code.

- **Drupal's interface can be a bit confusing:** Drupal administration menus are not intuitive — which is why you bought this book, right? I show you where everything is and explain Drupal's language for things throughout this book.

What Drupal Can Do for Your Site

From Web polls to blogs and shopping carts, your site can be full of great features without any need for you to get into the actual Web programming side of things. As you look through the features, think about creative ways you can use them for the sites you are building.

You won't have to build all of these at once; you can always add new features to and remove features from your site any time.

Polls

A poll is a question posed to visitors on your site that users can answer. Polls are great for getting your community of users involved in discussions. Drupal has a simple interface that allows you to create custom polls, such as the one shown in Figure 1-1.

Figure 1-1: A poll.

After a registered user has voted, he will see a tally of the current voting results (see Figure 1-2) and have the option of cancelling his vote. He can then vote again if he wishes. His vote counts only once.

Figure 1-2: Poll results with Cancel your vote button.

Blogs

One of the primary reasons Web Content Management Systems are extremely popular is the ease with which you can create blogs. Drupal provides full-featured blogging, complete with

- Automatically archived past entries
- A simple-to-use interface for creating new blog entries
- An optional comment system for site visitors to contribute their thoughts (see Figure 1-3)

Blogs aren't used just to document someone's daily activities. Companies leverage blogs to keep the content on their sites fresh. Instead of having to create new HTML Web pages every time they publish a press release, for example, they can blog the information.

Not only is it incredibly easy to create blog entries, but you also develop a history of all your blog postings over time. And all this information, and any other content posted on your site in any other location, including forums, static pages, and comments, can be made searchable — an incredibly useful feature! (Notice the search box in the upper-right-hand corner of Figure 1-3.) It's also a built-in module you activate.

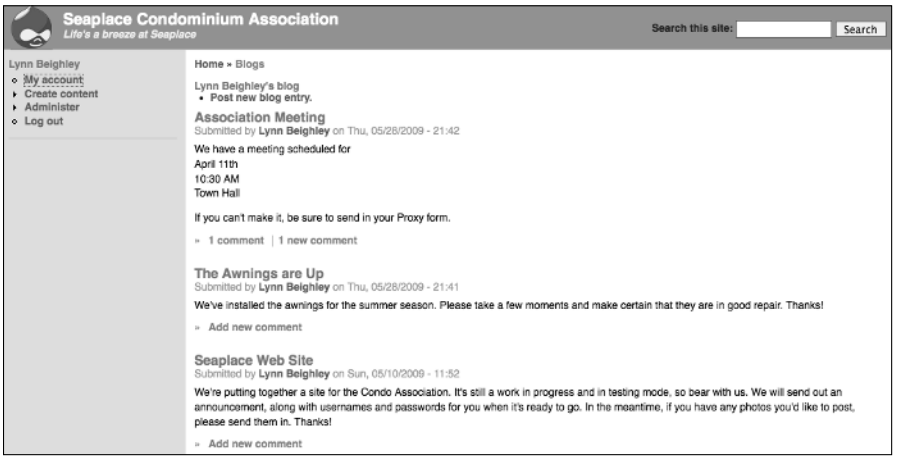

Figure 1-3: Blog entries with comments enabled.

Contact forms

It isn't the most exciting feature of a Web site, but it is an important one: Your site visitors need a way to get in touch with you. In the past, if you didn't have programming skill, you might have used an HTML *mailto* link on a Web page that never reliably worked. Drupal takes care of the contact form for you and creates a Web form:

- The form sends the content to your e-mail address, or wherever else you tell Drupal to send it, when the form is submitted (see Figure 1-4).
- You can configure the form to automatically send a custom confirmation message to the e-mail address of the person who submits the form.

  You can't change the fields in this form, but you can modify the text and add information, such as a contact address, a map and directions, and a phone number.

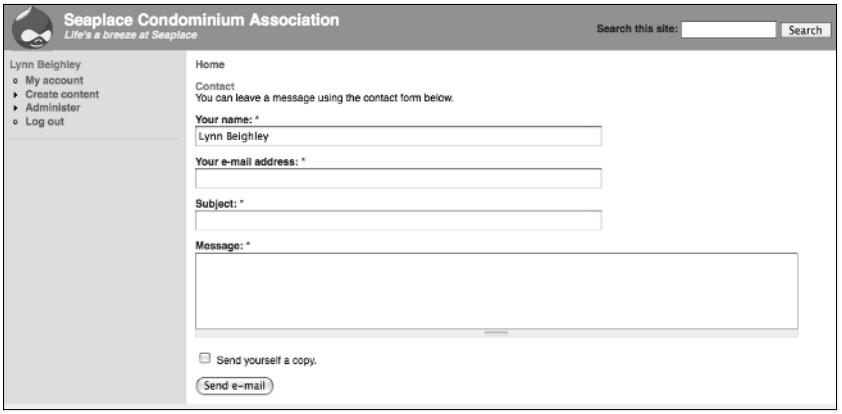

Figure 1-4: A contact form.

Forums

A blog is generally used to share large amounts of information with your users, with the information flowing one way, from you to your site visitors. A forum is most often used to allow your site visitors to chat amongst themselves. If it's important to you to build community interaction and encourage communication among the users of your site, you should consider adding a forum.

A forum consists of a set of *discussions,* as shown in Figure 1-5:

Figure 1-5: A forum containing a set of discussions.

- Inside each discussion is a set of topics (see Figure 1-6).
- Inside each topic, your users post their comments and replies to each other's comments.

  After you drill down into a discussion, you see all posts for that discussion. You also see a small icon indicating postings you have not read since you last visited the forum.

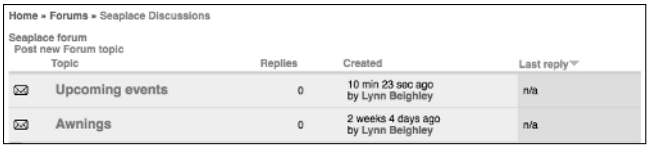

Figure 1-6: Topics within a discussion.

Like many of Drupal's features, the forum configuration settings give you a great deal of control over the permissions you give your users. You can either

- Maintain complete control over discussion topics.
- Allow your users to create topics.

You can even delegate specific people to be forum moderators and help you share the workload.

Image galleries

While sites like Flickr allow you to share your photographs or video, there are reasons why you may not want to upload them there:

- There's always the possibility that you don't want your work publicly viewable.
- After your media is on a Web site not your own, the site might keep a copy of it, even if you try to delete it.

  On Flickr, your work once uploaded may be subject to a *Creative Commons License* (`http://www.flickr.com/creativecommons/`). This means that anyone can distribute or display your work.

If you want to maintain some control over your photographs, images, and video clips, or if they are in some way part of your overall Web site theme — for example, photos from a company outing — you may want to restrict access to them. With Drupal, you can allow them to be viewable only to registered users of your site.

Although Drupal doesn't come with an image gallery module, there are several great third-party free modules available. I like one named, appropriately enough, Gallery2 (see Figure 1-7).

The gallery integrates with your Web site, allowing you to control whether site visitors have to be logged in to view images. It also allows your users to upload their own images if you choose to allow that.

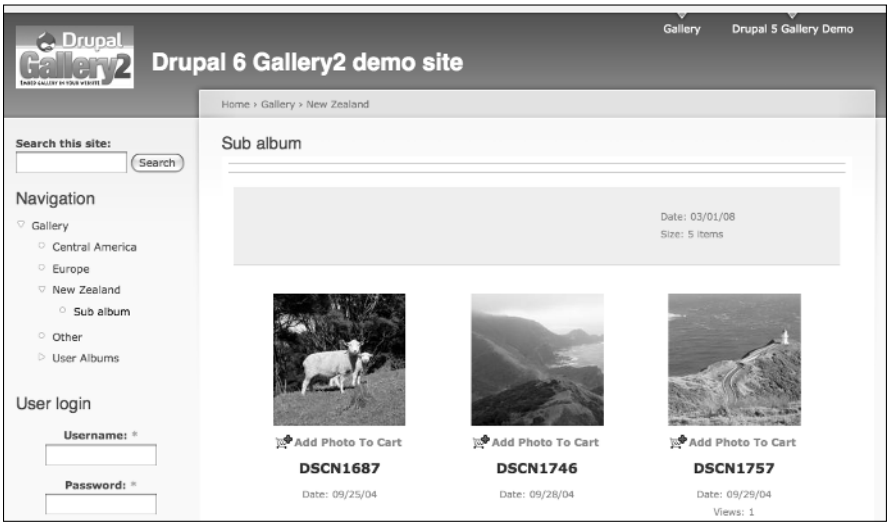

Figure 1-7: Gallery2 module for Drupal.

Examples of Drupal sites

Are you excited about your Web site? You should be. Following are a few really nice sites built using Drupal. Take a look and you'll see why I recommend them.

Drupal.org

It would very odd if Drupal's own site wasn't built with Drupal. Drupal.org (see Figure 1-8) is, and you can see many of the features I mention in use there, from blogs to forums and a search box, along with quite a few more.

Zappos.com

Zappos is a major online retailer that has leveraged Drupal to create a robust online store. Although it customizes the Drupal code base, much of the core Drupal code is used.

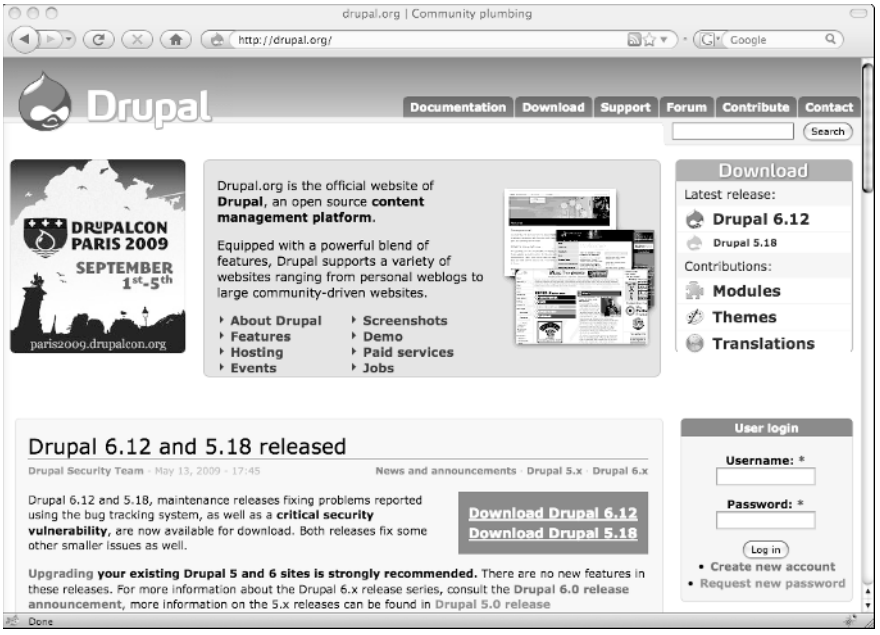

Figure 1-8: The home of Drupal.

Drupalmuseum.com and Drupalsites.net

These two Drupal sites exist to showcase other Drupal sites:

- Drupalmuseum.com (see Figure 1-9)
- Drupalsites.net

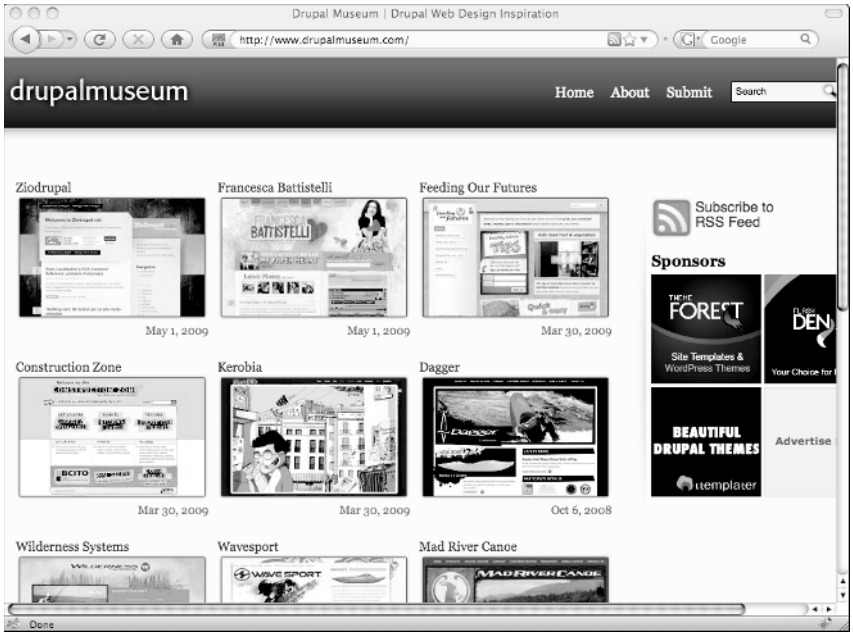

Figure 1-9: Drupal museum.com features attractive Drupal sites.

Most of the featured sites have substantially customized their appearance, but the code behind them is all Drupal.