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How visual editing has evolved over the years

And how it's been reimagined

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How visual editing has evolved over the years

Visual editing tools are crucial in the content design process, but they haven't always been well incorporated into content management systems (CMSs).

From WYSIWYG to AI-powered personalization, visual editors have come a long way. Modern visual editors give creators the power to write content, add images, style text, and make other customizations independently without relying on developers to code the content into a website.

This guide explores the journey of visual editing from 1991, when Tim Berners-Lee used an HTML-like hypertext system to create the first website, to today, when AI technology and intuitive CMS tools allow users with no technical background to streamline content creation and personalize it for multiple channels and audiences with the click of a button.

Learn about Contentstack Visual Builder

The early days: Coding single web pages and using basic WYSIWYG editors

The original approach to online content creation was difficult and code-heavy. Building a website required front-end programming skills and involved multiple teams, which led to communication barriers and bottlenecks. While the marketing team created the content, the development team was tasked with publishing it to a website. Processes were slow and cumbersome.

What You See Is What You Get (WYSIWYG) editors were introduced to try to close the gap between creating content and publishing it.

WYSIWYG editors simplified content creation because content creators were able to write and publish content themselves, and have an idea of how the content would look published. Creators could control some granular details like font, text size, and images. However, they were still limited to using rigid templates and publishing content to a single channel.

2024
AI-powered Visual CMS

2013
Headless CMS

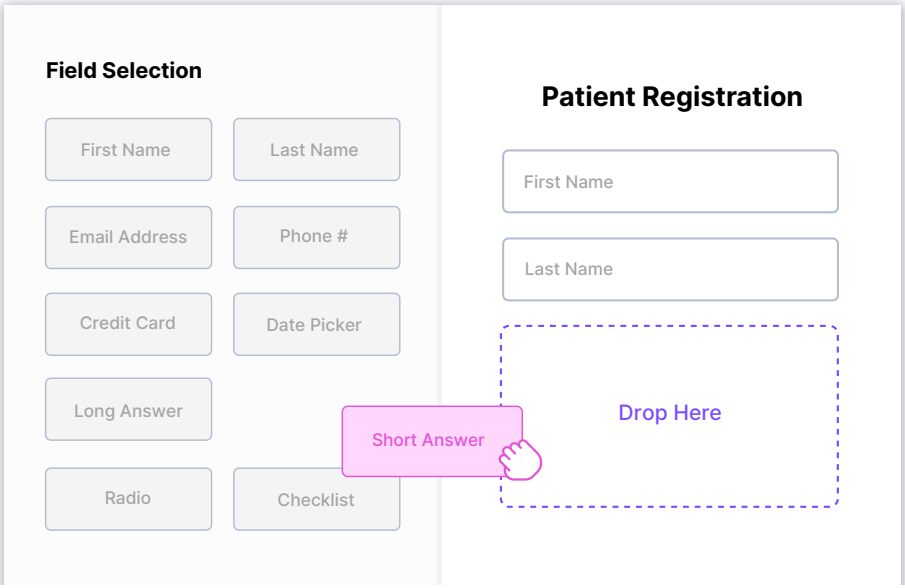
2010
Drag & drop editing

2000
WYSIWSG editing

1991
First website

The rise of drag-and-drop interfaces signaled a greater shift to visual interfaces

The shift towards more intuitive, drag-and-drop interfaces, like those used by WordPress and Wix, allowed content creators more control over page layout and structure.



With drag-and-drop, users can select specific templates depending on how they want to use the site and set themes that control style details across the entire site at once. This method is much more affordable than hiring a professional to build a custom website.

However, it still has limitations, such as a lack of an audience preview, live editing, and only single-channel capability.

Inline editing

Inline editing further simplified publishing web content, and solved the problem of being unable to preview it. Inline editors allow users to make changes to content directly on the page, instead of switching between editing and viewing modes.

This method saves an immense amount of time, because users can make changes and immediately publish them, instead of using a separate editing interface or relying on developers to publish, and then verifying that the content was published correctly. Inline editing can be useful for making quick adjustments or corrections to simple pages like a landing page or blog post.

The problem with inline editing is that truly competitive companies aren't marketing on just one or two simple web pages anymore. They market on multiple channels targeting a wide range of audiences and needs.

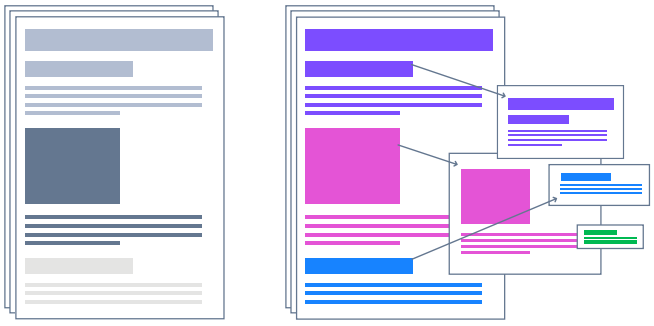
Inline page editors are not suitable for larger companies that require a robust omnichannel content management system and deep personalization.

The emergence of visual editing for structured content

Because organizations now need to market across multiple channels to stay competitive, companies have turned to a structured approach to manage and deliver content. Structured content is designed for easy reuse across various channels. The content is broken down into modular pieces, which are organized and classified like data. Then the pieces can be assembled and reassembled for different use cases.

Structured content makes it easy for content editors and developers to search for and reuse content. Editors can easily weave pieces of content into new campaigns without creating fresh content each time. This approach saves teams a lot of time and companies a lot of money.

Unstructured versus Structured Content



So structured content is great, but visually editing structured content is more challenging than editing content that's simply embedded in front-end design. For example, using rigid templates in drag-and-drop or inline editors limits content building options. Editors can't create unique and precise content experiences without help from developers.

Content teams also have trouble making quick edits to content. They often rely on developer support for even minor content updates. And it can also be hard to predict exactly how the updates will appear live, which contributes to a slow and ineffective editing process.

New structured approach to content calls for new visual editing solutions

The structured approach requires new solutions to manage and manipulate content to fit a variety of channels and devices. Old technologies like inline editors can't meet these needs. That's why companies are turning to headless CMSes for their visual editing needs.

Headless content is modular and decoupled from formatting and programming, so marketers can personalize it for specific channels and devices without changing how the content appears everywhere.

But not all headless CMSes come equipped with visual editors. Contentstack's Visual Builder product was specifically developed to reduce friction in the process of visually editing structured content. Visual Builder helps to overcome obstacles commonly faced by marketing teams by providing features like live editing, drag-and-drop blocks, and audience preview — all compatible with modular, omnichannel content publishing.

The travel company Golfbreaks is just one example of what teams are able to accomplish with modern visual editing technology for structured content. By using Visual Builder, Golfbreaks was able to maintain brand consistency across teams without stifling creativity, while saving development resources. Owner Jack Simkins explains that "with the changes editors can now make themselves, we anticipate fewer engineering requests, freeing up developers to focus on higher-value projects."

Visual editing tools built for headless CMSes shift the power of design control and customization back to the marketing team and content editors, the people who are best equipped to create engaging and attractive content.

AI-powered visual editing drives the future of content design

The future of content editing is not just visual — it's also powered by AI to be faster and more accessible to all users. AI technology can assist with smart content optimization, image recognition, and particularly with personalization.

Amidst a brand relevancy crisis, brands are increasingly prioritizing personalized experiences. But personalization is difficult and requires marketers to have agility and control over their content. Contentstack is breaking new ground in giving that control to content teams with its Visual Builder featuring native AI-powered personalization.

The Visual Builder is augmented by brand-aware generative AI, personalization, and automation features that unlock value for marketing teams while saving resources of development teams.

And we're not stopping there. We're continuously brainstorming to find new ways AI can automate tasks, implement changes and enhance the visual editing experience.

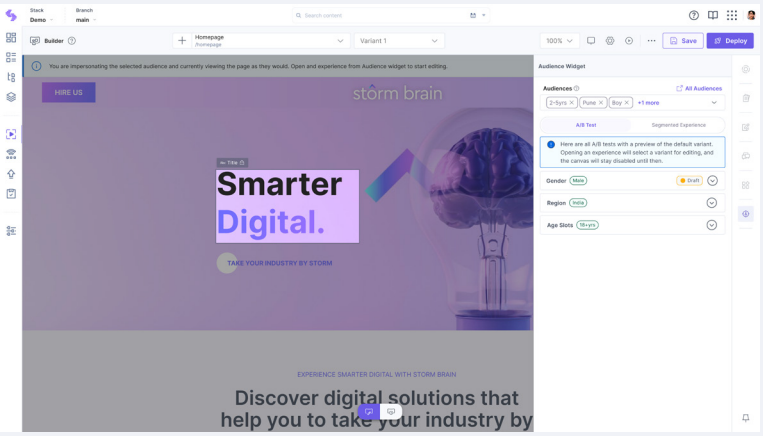
Contentstack has a vision for the future of visual editing

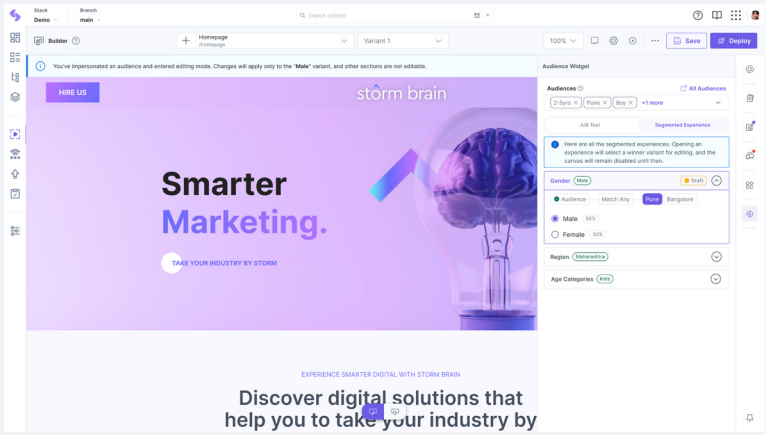
Contenstack is committed to innovating new and improved tools for visual content editing. While developing our Visual Builder product, we worked hard to identify major friction points for content editors, and then created features to help smooth them out.

Here are a few of those features:

Live editing

Live editing gives content editors the power to change text, images and details directly on the page without breaking anything or going off-brand. Pages are marked by contextual highlights showing editable areas, like headers or image fields.



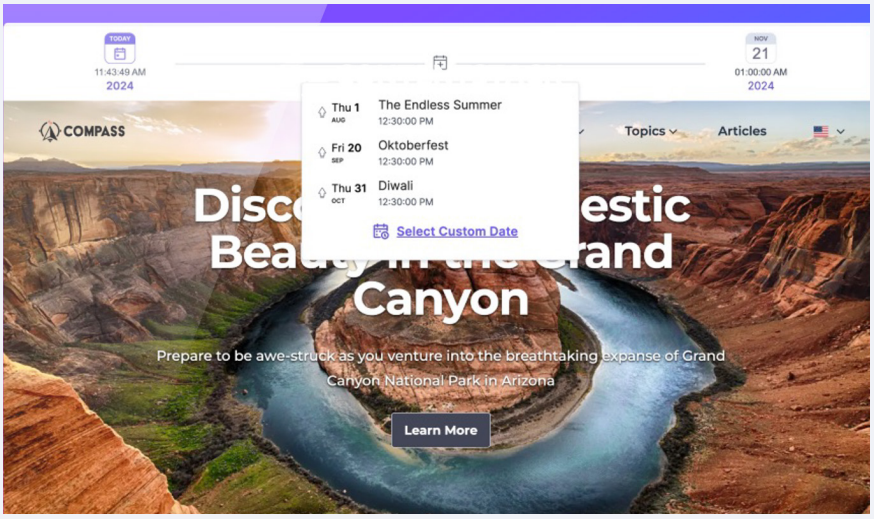


Drag-and-drop blocks

This isn't your standard drag-and-drop editor. With Contentstack, users can manipulate a drag-and-drop interface to insert and rearrange developer-created content blocks. The result is an on-brand, customizable build experience that combines design control with flexibility.

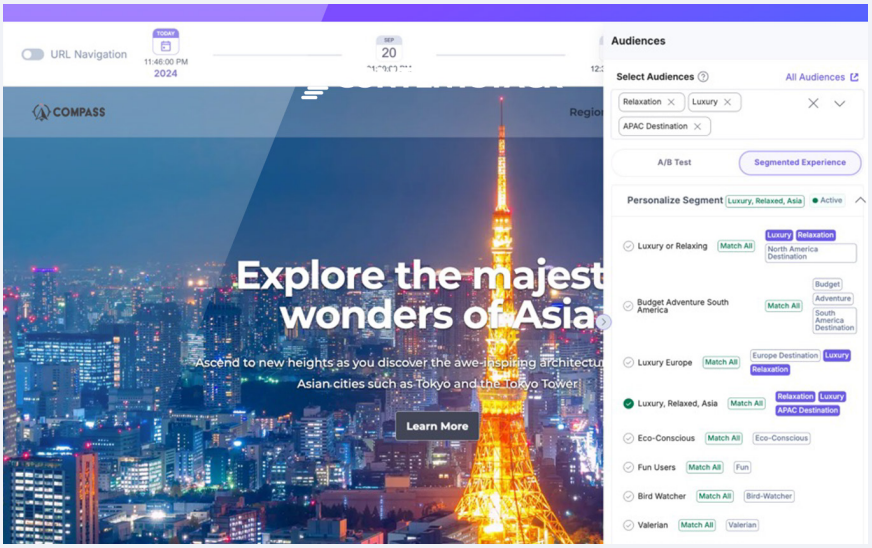
Timeline

With Timeline, users can navigate a chronological view of content to see how future updates will look compared to the current content. They can preview and compare different versions side-by-side to get the full perspective. Teams now have a better way to review, plan and collaborate before changes actually go live.



Audience Preview

The Audience Preview feature was developed to address a need for more visibility into how content appears to different audience segments once published. Audience Preview can be leveraged with Contentstack's Personalize to preview how content will appear to different audiences based on details like customer data or experiment results.



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Experience the power of modern visual editing

As the internet evolves, visual editing has progressed from the bare minimum to a robust set of tools that shifts design power back to marketers. In a headless world, content editors and marketers can now see to create visually appealing, personalized content experiences for a wide range of audiences.

Contentstack is leading the pack when it comes to the future of visual editing for structured content. It offers all the benefits of a headless CMS, combined with a powerful set of visual tools that make it easy for teams to create content with speed and agility for any type of content experience.

Are you ready to explore Contentstack's visual editing capabilities?

Request a demo

Learn more at **contentstack.com**