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Article abstract

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Technical Evaluation Report

51. Text-based Conferencing: Features vs. functionality

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Abstract

This report examines three text-based conferencing products: *WowBB, Invision Power Board,* and *vBulletin*. Their selection was prompted by a feature-by-feature comparison of the same products on the *WowBB* website. The comparison chart painted a misleading impression of *WowBB*'s features in relation to the other two products; so the evaluation team undertook a more comprehensive and impartial comparison using the categories and criteria for online software evaluation developed by the American Society for Training and Development (ASTD). The findings are summarised in terms of the softwares' pricing, common features/ functions, and differentiating features.

Introduction

Asynchronous text-based conferencing, also known as bulletin boards, provides a flexible medium for online discussion and collaboration. It is also relatively inexpensive, as it does not require a high bandwidth or extra hardware. The licensing costs of individual products vary substantially, however. Text-based conferencing software can be attained as standalone products, or as a component of a larger software application such as a learning management system. Earlier reports in this series (reports #8, #43 and #44) have argued in favour of the flexibility provided by standalone components. Unnecessarily complex, integrated software packages are described by online students as 'bloatware,' providing more features than are actually needed.

Product Trials

The following evaluations use the ASTD software assessment criteria: see report # 7.

1. WowBB

This product markets itself as user-friendly and fully customisable forum software. It is privately owned and operated by Aycan Gulez, who is credited on the website for the design and programming. The evaluation is based on experiences with the trial software, and information on the product website.

Cost: see comparison table (see Appendix I).

Complexity: *WowBB* is a very user-friendly software, intuitive, and easy to navigate. At the time of the evaluation, the product had two sub-forums for customer support and product trouble-shooting. The two forums were started in May of 2003, and by October 2005, the total of new topics started in them by customers was 1,838. This number is substantially smaller than on the help forums of the other two product websites.

Control: The board administrator has a wide range of controls, including the ability to filter unwanted words, and to ban users by IP or email address. The style editor allows changes to the appearance of the board via familiar controls such as sliders and checkboxes. The changes are previewed in real-time.

Clarity: The language used in both the bulletin board and the website is in clear, simple English. The layout of both is eye-catching, though somewhat unprofessional in appearance. Screen clutter is reduced by locating buttons and icons in pop-up menus.

Common Technical Framework: *WowBB* requires PHP 4.0.5 or higher, and MySQL 3.23 or higher. An Apache webserver (any version) is recommended, but any other webserver supporting PHP should work as efficiently. The product's WYSIWYG editor requires *Internet Explorer* 5.5 or higher, or *Mozilla*/ *FireFox*. Users with other browsers see a standard text editor. *WowBB* can be integrated with a third-party chat-room called *SigmaChat*.

Notable Features:

- The integrated spell-checker highlights misspelled words and offers suggestions
- Employs a smart caching algorithm that speeds up response times by storing popular pages in a fast cache
- *WowBB* automatically detects the correct time-zone setting for the user
- Can transform many forum URLs to a format that even the most selective search engine will not decline. Requires an Apache webserver and an Apache module called 'mod_rewrite'
- Allows users to read new postings via email

Overall comments

WowBB lives up to its promise as a user-friendly and fully customisable forum software. In spite of all the features it offers, its best feature is its simplicity. This is evident in the website forums, where topics started by customers looking for assistance over the last three and a half years is low compared to the other two bulletin boards evaluated in this report. *WowBB*'s second advantage is that it is substantially less expensive than the other two products. However, the price information given on the product website is vague in relation to the likely price of future major upgrades to the software.

2. Invision Power Board

Invision Power Board is a product of *Invision Power Services* (IPS), a site and community-building services provider based in Virginia, USA. The evaluation is based on experiences with the trial software (v 2.0), information on the product website, and information from a sales representative contacted by 'phone.

Cost: see comparison table (see Appendix I).

Complexity: The *Invision Board* is cluttered, with too many options available at a time. It is not intuitive, and at times navigation is difficult. A user manual is available, though at an additional cost. The company website offers a client forum where users can get help from other users. This forum contains a large number of topics (7,905 as of October 2005) started by customers since September 2004.

Control: All passwords are encrypted when the user registers, and individual forums can be password-protected. Moderators can delete or redirect forums, and edit and delete topics while on the board. A personal control panel allows users a wide range of options for using the program. A message tracker allows tracking of any personal message sent on the board. This feature gives users the chance to delete any sent messages that have not yet been read by their intended recipient(s). Users may deny other members the ability to send them messages by entering their name in the 'block list' on the personal message control panel.

Clarity: The layout of the home board is appealing, and the use of colour, line and space very professional in appearance. The discussion boards, however, contain much white space and require extensive scrolling.

Common Technical Framework: *Invision Power Board* requires PHP 4.3+ and either MySQL 3.23 or higher (4.0 + recommended), MSSQL, or *Oracle* 9i for database storage. The product is scalable and offers a wide range of applications and site integration. *IPS* offers a variety of software components for addition to the product. These include *Invision Gallery*, *Invision Blogs*, and *Invision Chat*.

Notable Features:

- Independent forum skins
- Detailed admin and moderator logs
- Detailed registration, topic, post and PM statistics
- Integrated language editor
- Integrated skin editor and CSS editor
- Allows for the formation of a portal
- Board traffic statistics (Note: the *WowBB* comparison chart incorrectly states *Invision Power Board* does not contain this feature).

Overall comments

Invision Power Board is marketed as an effortless, intuitive, and scalable bulletin board system. The product website states that it allows its clients to effortlessly build, manage, and promote an online community. "Advanced yet intuitive features, like multi-moderation, allow you to focus on developing your community, rather than wrestling with complex settings." Immediately under this sales pitch, the site contains a link to the *Invision Power Board* User's Guide, available for purchase at $24.99 US. Ironically, this begs the question, "Why is a user guide necessary for an effortless and intuitive bulletin board system; and should the client have to pay extra for a guide that makes a purchased product functional?" Once the trial version of the software was downloaded, it quickly became evident why a client might feel motivated to pay more for the User's Guide; for the product is saturated with features and options, and the administrator's control panel is worse still. While some users may appreciate the flexibility offered by these multiple features and options, previous reports in this series (see reports #8 and #43) have demonstrated that the majority does not.

3. vBulletin

vBulletin is described on the product website as a forums package and a 'community solution' for medium to large websites. It is a product of *Jelsoft Enterprises* based in the UK. It should be noted that the *WowBB* comparison table that initiated this review referred to the features of *vBulletin* v 3.0. The recent release of *vBulletin* 3.5 was evaluated, based on a review of information provided on the product website and online manual, the installation of the administrator's demonstration software, and a guest login on a website that uses *vBulletin* as its communication platform (www.sportbikers.net).

Cost: see comparison table (see Appendix I).

Complexity: The online user manual is extensive: 26 sections and six appendices with a total of 535 pages/ entries. Maneuvering the board is complex and definitely cannot be described as intuitive. For example, the admin demo requires two sets of username/ passwords for access, and was available to the evaluation team for only 24 hours, at which point a new one had to be established or a request for an extension made.

Control: Controls are available at administrator, moderator, and user levels.

Clarity: *vBulletin* uses a minimum of colour and other design features, and the presentation is linear.

Common Technical Framework: As with the other two programs tested, *vBulletin* can be run on any machine that supports PHP and MySQL. It is scalable, and its database server and webserver can reside on separate machines. Compatible operating systems include *Solaris*, *Linux*, *BSD*, *Windows*, and *Mac*. The product supports BB Code and HTML in posts.

Notable Features: Features offered are extensive, and the number of 'features' noted under 21 headings totals 100! The following are the features worth noting:

- Printer friendly versions on 'threads'
- Multiple public and private calendars

- Import facility – imports posts and members from other bulletin board systems
- Editable FAQ for boards.

Overall comments

vBulletin 3.5 is a feature-packed text-conferencing/ bulletin board, comparable in price to *Invision Power Board* 2.0. The extensive list of features does not translate into expanded functionality, however. In fact, the size limit of 19.5 kb for attachments and a 15-choice 'user reputation ranking' system are distracting. It would appear that the market to which *vBulletin* appeals is that of the technically expert and feature-needy customer.

Conclusions

Beginning as a simple comparison, this review became a full-scale evaluation of three conferencing systems. At one point in the review, the analysis became a contest between "features versus functionality." In its eagerness to prove that they had more features than the competitors, the *WowBB* vendor presented a biased and inaccurate comparison table, which made an unfair comparison with an outdated version of *vBulletin* board, and incorrectly stated that board traffic statistics were unavailable on the *Invision Power Board*.

In conclusion, the reviewers offer the following commentary on the basic differences between the programs. The majority of features are common to all three systems, with varying degrees of control, automation, and customisation being the key differentiators. Since each offers an extensive list of 'must have' features, a potential buyer needs to conduct a time-consuming review of each product in order to make an informed selection. Unless specific features are critical, the 'look and feel' of the program, price, and ease with which answers to key questions can be found will likely be determining factors in a decision to purchase.

The next report in the series examines the features of high-cost audio/ videoconferencing packages

> **N.B.** Owing to the speed with which Web addresses become outdated, online references are not cited in this report. They are available, together with updates to the current report, at the Athabasca University software evaluation site: *http://cde.athabascau.ca/softeval/*. Italicized product names in this report can be assumed to be registered industrial or trademarks.
>
> *JPB.* Series Editor, Technical Notes

APPENDIX I

Comparison of the three products

Criteria	*WowBB 1.65*	*Invision Powerboard 2.0*	*vBulletin 3.5*
PRICING (in $ USD)			
Lease	$49/year	$69.95/year	$85/year
Buy	$89	$185	$160
Upgrades	Free for 1 year only, major upgrades discounted after year/1	Included	Included with lease price. Free for 1 year with purchase, then 30./year
Web hosting	Starting at $7.95 with purchase, or $10.95/mo. with one year lease	Available: from $10/mo. to $75/mo. depending on the package purchased	Not offered
Support: online	Included	Included	Included
Support: telephone		Free for 1 year only	1 mo. $60; 6 mos. $180; 12 mo. $300; Toll-free in US only
Other	90-day money back guarantee	Free installation by technicians	Moderate discounts for bulk purchase; Installation $135/license Brand-free option $120/license
COMMON KEY* FEATURES/FUNCTIONALITY LIST			
Polls	Attachments	Avatars	
Private Messaging	Event Calendar	Paid Subscriptions	
Customisable templates	IP & email banning	Bad word filter	
Emoticons/Smilies	Multiple languages	Search capability	
Differentiated User Groups	Multiple Moderators	Board Traffic Statistics	
E-mail notification	Full text searching		
* features listed on websites vary from 40 to 100 separate items, not always reflecting separate and distinguishing functionalities			
Auto install and upgrade	Yes	No	No
WSIWYG editor	Yes, shows as you type	No	Yes
Integrated spell checker	Yes	No	No
Avatars	Yes	Yes	Yes
Board traffic stats	Yes	Yes	Yes
Read forums via email	Yes	No	No
Time-zone & daylight saving setting	Auto detection	Yes	Yes
Read forms via email	Yes	No	No
Users selectable by location	Yes, US only	No	No
Custom user profile fields	Coming soon	Yes	Yes
User reputation/rating	Yes, complex calculation termed 'mana'	No	Yes, 15 level rating
User manual	Online	$24.99 user manual	Online, very large, 535 pages
Support	Private support forums & email	Support forums & e-mail	Support forums & e-mail
COPPA Compliant	Not indicated	Yes	Yes
Trial/demo	1 month	5 days	24 hour
Telephone Queries	No	Yes, sales & technical	Sales queries only

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