

The Headless vs Traditional CMS Worksheet

The choice is about developers and channels, not which architecture is fashionable. This is how to tell which problem you actually have.

The two designs, side by side

Not old versus new. Opposite trade-offs. Read across before you decide.

	Traditional CMS	Headless CMS
Content + design	Bound together, ships as one	Separated, content only via API
Website	Out of the box	Built by developers
Best for	A conventional website	Multi-channel publishing
Marketer independence	High for everyday edits	Low for anything visual
Developers	Not required day to day	Required, always
Cost to start / run	Lower	Higher
The trade	Convenience over flexibility	Flexibility over convenience

The two questions that decide it

This matters more than which sounds modern. Answer both honestly.

Do you have developers?

A team that can build and maintain a front end in code, not 'the agency might'.

1	2	3	4	5
---	---	---	---	---

Do you publish beyond one website?

App, in-store screens, partner sites, social, now or genuinely soon.

1	2	3	4	5
---	---	---	---	---

Reading it: High on both, headless earns its cost. Low on both, traditional keeps you independent and cheap, and choosing it is not settling. One high, one low: go headless only if you will truly use the flexibility, or look at a hybrid. Do not force a headless build onto a team that cannot sustain it.

The 'will we actually use it' test

The classic expensive mistake is going headless for flexibility that then sits unused while the team waits on developers for simple changes.

Name the specific multi-channel or customisation need that requires headless

If you cannot name one beyond 'it is modern', that is your answer.

—

—

Cost over three years, not licence price

Cost line	Traditional	Headless
Licence / subscription		
Front-end build		
Ongoing front-end maintenance		
Developer time		
Time to first page		

Remember the middle exists. Hybrid or decoupled CMSs, and traditional CMSs with an API mode, fit teams who are mostly one with a bit of the other. The pure binary pushes people to extremes they do not need.