



Symphony

Tailored Customer Service Gives Symphony The Edge

As Internet accessibility and e-Commerce gained momentum, the UK-based Symphony Group saw enormous potential for web applications to improve its service to customers.

"The customers in our three target markets have distinct requirements," states Alison Andrews, Symphony Group Marketing Manager. "We decided to implement an extranet that would deliver customer services tuned to the needs of the different sectors. This makes it easier and more profitable for our customers to do business with us – and that is what differentiates us from our competitors."

To enable them to deliver the new facilities quickly, Symphony's IT department chose Unify VISION Internet Integrator as their web application development tool.

Unify products stand the test of time

The Symphony Group has been using Unify products since 1988. At that time they decided to eventually replace several proprietary DEC systems with a central Unix server hosting a relational database. After evaluating the products available, the IT department selected ACCELL/SQL as their application development tool.

"We chose ACCELL/SQL because the toolset is very easy to learn and use, and it delivers excellent performance," says Ruth Rew, the group's IT Manager.

The first ACCELL/SQL application was a front-end estimating system, which is still in use today, though it has evolved considerably over the years. Next came sales order processing, at which stage the four ageing DEC PDP 11/70s were replaced initially by HP hardware and subsequently by an IBM P690 running an Oracle database. After that, the team developed in-house manufacturing and sales ledger systems, by which time all the core business applications were written in ACCELL/SQL. Horizontal functions such as human resources, payroll, general and nominal ledger use packaged solutions.

During that time, Rew's team kept an eye on competitive tools, but chose to stay with ACCELL/SQL. "We've never found a competitive

product that is as efficient" reports Rew. "For example, when we looked at Oracles Forms, we found that you would need to develop two separate forms for processing and reporting, whereas with ACCELL/SQL you only need one. We have never found a problem that ACCELL/SQL couldn't address economically, and the application framework has stood up well to all the changes and enhancements that have been built in over the years."

Mobile computing empowers the sales force

Unify VISION Internet Integrator was first used in 2000, when Symphony introduced mobile computing to its sales force. The group has 130 sales people throughout the UK, and the IT department wanted to equip them with laptops with CRM facilities and access to the company's intranet. "We decided that using Internet Integrator would be the fastest way to develop the sales force applications," states Ruth. "Because the 4GL is similar to that in ACCELL/SQL, the developers adopted the new product very quickly."

Having proved its productivity and superb database performance, Internet Integrator was the obvious choice of tool for the extranet applications.

Using Symphony's extranet, customers can track orders throughout their lifecycle – which can last for several years, in the case of large



housing development projects. Different types of customers have different needs, and user profiles determine the facilities available according to market sector, or even, in some cases, according to the user's specific role.

Faster delivery of designs and quotations

Typically an order will start with a design and a price quotation. For example, a building company developing a new housing estate might approach Symphony with plans for six different styles of house, and request a quotation for fitting the kitchens, indicating whether contemporary or traditional furniture is required, or a mixture. Symphony's designers create CAD drawings of the proposed kitchen designs and produce detailed quotations, specifying the range/units required and including all the relevant white goods and accessories needed to complete the kitchens. Because of the level of detail, these quotations are usually weighty documents – the largest so far running up to 800 pages!

Whereas in the past the quotation was printed, packaged and posted out to the customer, now it is posted to the extranet as soon as the design is complete, and a message is automatically emailed to the customer to announce its availability.

"This means that customers have access to their quotations three or four days earlier," reports Rew. "If they subsequently request any changes, again, the revised quotation is available online as soon as the changes are made. What's more, they can access the plans at any time of day or night and print out relevant parts of the document as and when they need to. As well as speeding up the process, this eliminates an enormous amount of paperwork and the cost of handling it."

Initially there was scepticism amongst customers as to the benefits of the system, but as people have become more comfortable with the concept of e-Commerce and experienced the benefits of using the system, the extranet has gained widespread approval. "Our retailer customers embraced it particularly quickly," comments Rew. "Lots of them now place their orders online, and very soon we will introduce the ability for builders to order online."

Faster resolution of customer queries

Another major advantage for both Symphony and its customers is the ability to track order progress via the extranet. "A large order with many call-offs spanning months or years can generate hundreds of queries regarding, for example, the range of furniture used for a particular

Symphony Best Use of Technology Award 2004 Finalist National Business Awards (North East Region)

Symphony's extranet built on Unify has won the company a place in the finals of these prestigious awards, acknowledged by the Chancellor of the Exchequer to be the "UK Business Oscars". The "Best Use of Technology" prize is awarded to "the organisation that can best demonstrate that it has effectively used business technology to create a significant and exploitable competitive or operational advantage in any business area including revenue, improved quality and/or customer convenience."

house type, colours, delivery week and so on," says Group Marketing Manager, Alison Andrews. "The vast majority of these queries can now be resolved immediately by customers accessing the extranet – whether it is during office hours or not. This has freed up resources that were previously tied to the telephone, and it means that we can respond faster to customers who do need to telephone, perhaps with more complex queries."

Andrews states that improving customer service throughout the supply chain has been the driver behind the implementation of the extranet. "The facilities that we provide to our customers enable them in turn to improve their own customer service levels. For example, once an order is in place, the builder can call off units "just in time" as they are needed. This enables them to offer their customers (the housebuyers) the final choice of colour and style when the sale is agreed."

This customer focus also reaps benefits in the social housing sector. Symphony has mobile kitchen designers who work with Housing Associations (HAs). When a HA embarks on a project to refurbish the kitchens in an existing complex, a Symphony designer will visit the residents to conduct individual kitchen surveys and ascertain the occupants' choice of layout, furniture and colour (within agreed parameters). "Now tenants can participate in choosing their own kitchens, which obviously increases their satisfaction," says Andrews.

Up to eight surveys can be carried out each day, then the designer produces the CAD drawings on his laptop, uploads the specifications to the main system and the orders are created automatically. Via the extranet, the HA management can view up-to-date project progress and track costs against budget, helping them to monitor their own performance against target. "This gives the HA tight control of the project," states Andrews. "No other kitchen supplier offers this service, so technological innovation has definitely given us competitive edge in this market."

Customer-focused business applications

Ruth Rew attributes much of the success of the extranet to the fact that she and her team have worked closely with customers to make sure that their needs are addressed. "Primarily, the extranet is *their* system," she asserts. "We started off with the basic idea, but it has been developed in conjunction with them, and tailored to meet the needs of the different sectors. We make it clear that we want to adapt our processes to suit them."

The most recent development has been to deliver management information to the internal business managers and board directors via the intranet. "We believe in quality, not quantity," states Rew. "The reports present top level information and allow managers to drill down as they require, or to "slice and dice" - change their view of the data using drop-down boxes. They can then print the information on the screen, or cut and paste it into a spreadsheet or other document."

Ruth's application development team consists of eleven developers and seven business analysts. "We pride ourselves on the success of our applications, which we view as *business* projects not *technical* ones. My staff really understand the business and the needs of both our internal and external customers"

Benefits throughout the business

Alison Andrews also highlights some less tangible benefits of the applications. "These

business tools have had a very positive effect on staff morale. Our business managers are well-equipped to deal with customers professionally, and obviously this increases customer confidence. Employees throughout the company can see that we're investing for the future, and that increases their stability." The next stage will be to increase the interactivity of the extranet's facilities, and Rew is intending to introduce Unify NXJ in the near future.

Unify is an important business partner

Over the years, Symphony Group staff have developed a good working relationship with Unify contacts at all levels. "We have always been confident that any problems that arise will be resolved," reports Rew. "Unify never passes the buck. They take responsibility and work with us to investigate and resolve issues."

"Unlike some suppliers, Unify keeps in tune with its customers throughout the world and remains approachable. We have always been confident that our views are heard, and that we will receive the support that we need from them. I see our relationship as a professional partnership based on mutual respect."

The Symphony Group

Established in 1971, The Symphony Group is the UK's largest privately-owned furniture manufacturer. Its annual turnover in 2003 was over £105 million. With two large manufacturing plants in Leeds and Rotherham, both in northern England, and a small bespoke manufacturing complex in Nottingham, the group services customers throughout the UK, as well as a growing worldwide export market. Symphony markets its fitted kitchen, bathroom and bedroom furniture to three main sectors: house builders, housing associations and retailers.



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