



Restaurant and Hospitality Company Boosts Business with Improved Web Presence

Overview

Country or Region: United States
Industry: Hospitality

Customer Profile

Headquartered in Chicago, Illinois, Levy Restaurants is a specialized restaurant and hospitality company with 91 locations. It has 13,000 employees. Annual sales are approximately U.S.\$430 million.

Business Situation

Levy Restaurants wanted to completely reinvent its Web site to improve site manageability, reduce recruiting costs, boost online reservations, and more effectively reach the company's broad audience base.

Solution

Levy used Microsoft® Solution for Internet Business, including Microsoft ASP.NET, Content Management Server 2002, and Commerce Server 2002 Enterprise Edition, to rebuild and relaunch its Web site.

Benefits

- Improved perception of the company with customers
- Improved site manageability
- Reduced recruiting costs
- Doubled online reservations
- Created new channel for sales

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Alison Weber, Senior Vice President of Marketing, Levy Restaurants

Levy Restaurants, a growing restaurant and hospitality company, wanted to overhaul its Web site to better reflect its brand online. The site needed to be easy to update and make it easy to deliver information to a diverse audience base, including potential employees, patrons, partners, and the media. Levy Restaurants decided to build its new site using Microsoft® Solution for Internet Business, including Microsoft ASP.NET, Content Management Server 2002, and Commerce Server 2002 Enterprise Edition. The solution gave Levy a consolidated environment in which to extend its brand online yet helped to lower the cost of site maintenance and employee recruiting. With the solution, the company also increased revenue, seeing private bookings increase 5 percent and restaurant bookings from the Web site double in the first five weeks after launch.

Situation

Levy Restaurants is a specialized food service organization with a network of award-winning restaurants and food service operations at sports and entertainment facilities. Based in Chicago, Illinois, the company owns, manages, or operates 91 restaurants in 38 markets across the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom, and holds catering agreements with major event organizations like the Grammy Awards and the World Series. The company operates around the “Levy Difference,” a corporate commitment to creating a memorable dining experience for patrons visiting any of Levy’s establishments. That philosophy has helped the company achieve phenomenal growth in recent years: Levy Restaurants has seen double-digit growth each year since 1998 and continues to open new restaurants and dining facilities each year. The company currently has 1,000 corporate employees and 12,000 wait-staff associates.

As a customer-focused company serving thousands of diners and prestigious clients, Levy must present a professional image through all marketing and sales channels, including its Web site. Levy Restaurants’ original Web site, built in 1998, primarily served as a public resource for general information about the company’s history and locations. The site relied on a small Microsoft® Access database and complicated Active Server Pages (ASP) on the front end and did little to promote the breadth and depth of Levy’s business or extend the Levy brand online.

The marketing and technology teams at Levy recognized several challenges with the original site, which were unsolvable with its current architecture. “The old site definitely outgrew our business needs and stopped serving as an asset for the company,” says Alison Weber, Senior Vice President of Marketing for Levy Restaurants.

To better reflect the company’s value statement, as well as the verbal and visual messages that the marketing team wanted to present, the company began to look for a more far-reaching online environment. Levy’s marketing and technology teams identified several requirements for the Web site. First, site manageability needed to be greatly simplified to take the pressure off the five staff members who had been responsible for updating the old site. These staff members, all of whom had other job roles, were the only ones who could modify the site, and that could take weeks. “If a menu was altered or a restaurant changed its hours, we were unable to react quickly to inform our customers,” says Weber. “This was not the type of customer service we wanted to be known for.”

There was another reason why Levy wanted the site to be easy to update and manage. The company envisioned updating the site as a corporate-wide effort, rather than keeping that role in the hands of a few overworked employees. Levy wanted employees spread out across the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom to contribute regularly to the site and “own” certain sections, making updates and changes that they felt would best serve their customers. For example, the company wanted a restaurant owner in Chicago to be able to update the restaurant’s weekly menu online without hassle. Levy felt that this collaborative approach would help it meet its goal of having information on the site that is up-to-date and relevant to a diverse group of customers. This approach would also save Levy from having to hire a full-time staff to maintain and update the new site.

Levy also decided that it wanted the site to greatly simplify hiring and recruiting new employees. “Because Levy has 12,000 wait-staff associates, a lot of time goes into recruiting and human resources management,” says Craig Dooley, Director of

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Craig Dooley, Director of Information Systems,
Levy Restaurants

Information Systems for Levy Restaurants. “We hoped the Web could simplify those functions.” Levy wanted to do a better job of locating suitable job applicants by making it easier for managers to quickly post detailed job descriptions and enable applicants to submit their information online. By simplifying the recruiting process, the Levy team saw an opportunity to reduce the time that Levy managers spend on hiring and the money spent on third-party, external recruiting resources.

Finally, Levy wanted its Web site to reach an audience of journalists, who could have a significant impact on the company’s public perception. The company needed an easily updatable site to support a dynamic press room that would keep the media interested in Levy Restaurants and convey a positive, professional image of the company.

Solution

After careful consideration, Levy Restaurants decided to implement a dynamic Web site environment to meet its business needs. The solution delivers a more manageable site for the company by enabling easier content updates and site changes. It also enables Levy to create new, easy-to-navigate categories that allow users to thoroughly research Levy’s diverse restaurants, locations, and catering services.

The Levy Restaurants’s team looked closely at all options before deciding to pursue a Microsoft solution. The team considered solutions from Vignette, Interwoven, and Devine but deemed those options to be expensive and unreliable due to uncertainty about those companies’ long-term viability. Impressed by the availability of consulting resources for and the affordable price of the Microsoft technologies, Levy chose to adopt the Microsoft solution. “We saw that the Microsoft solution would allow us to manage the site ourselves without relying on consultants or outside experts,” says Dooley.

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Levy partnered with Avenue A/Razorfish, a Microsoft Certified Partner, to design the information architecture and visual design of the new site, as well as develop, test, and deploy it. Development began July 2003, and the new site, built on the Microsoft Solution for Internet Business, was launched in February 2004. The site utilizes Microsoft ASP.NET, as well as the Microsoft Windows® 2000 Server operating system, Commerce Server 2002 Enterprise Edition, Content Management Server 2002, and SQL Server™ 2000 Standard Edition, which are part of the Microsoft Windows Server System™ integrated server software. Levy has a Microsoft Services Premier Support contract with Microsoft for ongoing site support.

After a seven-month development and testing period, Levy Restaurants launched its new Web site. To expand the community of contributors to the site, and take pressure off the small group of people who had been maintaining the site, Levy trained at least one Web author at most of the company’s restaurant locations. In a training session lasting less than two hours, each Web author learned how to make updates. There are currently 100 contributing Web authors representing management, sales, human resources, and marketing groups across the company.

Benefits

The implementation of the Microsoft Solution for Internet Business resulted in a site that exceeds the company’s expectations. Soon after the new site was launched, Levy saw its Internet restaurant bookings increase and saw a sharp decrease in the time required to recruit and hire new employees. Levy feels that the new site is a better reflection of the company’s image: a dynamic, customer-focused organization passionate about food.

“Now we can better manage the site process and see what and how often sections are changed.”

Craig Dooley, Director of Information Systems, Levy Restaurants

Customers, partners, and restaurant managers alike have given the site high marks. “Before I had one inquiry a month from the Web site; now I have four a week,” says Angela Grojean, Sales and Marketing Manager for the Arrowhead Club, one of Levy’s venues. “Today, we can go into the site and make changes easily, letting customers know about big events and menu changes. The new site makes my life easier and saves me considerable time and money.”

Increased Online Reservations

Since deploying the new solution, Levy has seen its online reservations improve. Private parties and events are big business for Levy, and the company was pleased to see Internet reservations for private bookings rise 5 percent in the first five weeks. Reservations have increased in part because of the site’s database, built on SQL Server 2000 Standard Edition, which allows customers to get up-to-date information about any Levy restaurant. Customers can search by location or restaurant type to retrieve contact information and current menus, and can make reservations that will be recorded by the designated restaurant.

Levy also reports that restaurant bookings from the Web site have doubled since the new site was launched. “It’s very easy now for customers to interact with our restaurants and make reservations at a location of their choice,” Weber says. “We think it shows customers how important it is to us that they enjoy their dining experience from the very beginning.”

Created Better Corporate Perception

Before, Levy Restaurants was concerned that its site did little to promote its brand and drive people into the restaurants. With the Microsoft Solution for Internet Business, Levy could easily create a site that reflects the breadth and depth of its business and the company’s commitment to its customers.

Today, the site features a pleasing layout with bright, crisp photographs of food. Rotating text greets the reader, conveying the welcoming feeling that visitors experience in a Levy Restaurant.

The Microsoft Solution for Internet Business enables Levy’s marketing team to experiment with visual and verbal content until the site achieves the look and feel that the team desires. For example, Content Management Server 2002—part of Windows Server System and the Microsoft Solution for Internet Business—enables the marketing team to put up and take down photos before deciding on the best one to post on the Web site. “You can’t smell food on the site, but the site still needs to reflect the emotional experience of dining with Levy,” says Weber. “Microsoft Content Management Server enables us to find the perfect photos and content we need to accurately represent our brand online.”

Improved Site Manageability

The implementation of the Microsoft Solution for Internet Business has freed the five employees who used to maintain Levy’s site to focus on their primary jobs. Today, the Levy Restaurant Web site is a companywide effort; 100 employees update the site for their respective business segments. This collaborative approach distributes the workload and lets employees write about the part of the company they know best, keeping the site up-to-date and relevant. Today, restaurant owners can post their own menu changes, rather than wait weeks for such changes to be completed by an employee in another part of the company.

Employees at Levy’s restaurants report that learning to update the site on their own was straightforward. “I spent a week in training to learn the content management tool and realized I can’t mess it up,” says Grojean. “It was so easy to import and add information that now updating my section of the site is a

breeze.” Grojean estimates that it takes approximately five minutes a day to update the Arrowhead Club section of the Levy Restaurant’s Web site.

The Microsoft Solution for Internet Business implementation also allows for better oversight of the site by Levy’s technology team. Although site contributors across the country make changes constantly, Dooley and his team have control over the site at all times and can monitor how the site is being altered. “Now we can better manage the site process and see what and how often sections are changed. This helps us ensure consistency on the site without having to make all the changes ourselves,” says Dooley.

Reduced Recruiting Costs

Another improvement introduced by the new solution is employee-recruiting functionality. Because the previous site was difficult to update, job postings were often obsolete, and hiring managers were bombarded by untargeted applications, sometimes for jobs that had already been filled. Today, the recruitment and application process is easier for both potential employees and hiring managers at Levy.

For example, hiring managers can quickly add job postings to the site, using a familiar interface similar to that of Microsoft Office Word. They can add detailed information about the desired employee qualifications, helping to ensure that the most qualified job seekers apply. Applicants can search by job or location and submit a general application online. These improvements mean that Levy depends less on outside recruiting and hiring agencies, and conserves its in-house staff for more strategic human resource functions.

Created New Channel for Interaction with Diverse Audiences

The new site has made it easier for Levy to reach all of its audiences at a minimal cost.

Because the site is easy to update and manage, sections customized for restaurant patrons, partners, journalists and the media, potential employees, and the growing number of catering customers can be kept current and dynamic.

For example, restaurant patrons in Chicago can search for a Levy restaurant in their area and view current menus online. Customers interested in catering and event options can search by region, city, or type of event to receive up-to-date information on available services in their area. In the site’s virtual pressroom, journalists can browse well-organized sections for recent press releases, the company history, biographical information about company officers, and news articles about the company.

Laid Foundation for Future Opportunities
Levy required a solution that would grow with its business, and the Microsoft Solution for Internet Business meets that need. Levy sees opportunities for expansion in its catering operations and is pleased that the site is flexible enough to support new sections and features for the catering segment. Levy is also growing through its partnerships with sites like wedding portal TheKnot.com and can employ the integration features in the solution to quickly reflect those new partnerships online.

Levy Restaurants is already looking at ways to build on its current solution to make the Web site a more powerful sales and marketing tool. For example, it plans to reuse much of the site content for an employee intranet, perhaps built on Microsoft SharePoint® Products and Technologies. The company also plans to use the e-commerce features built into the Microsoft Solution for Internet Business to offer customers the option of purchasing gift certificates on the site. Finally, Levy is looking at ways to personalize the site and perhaps send

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personalized e-mail messages to stimulate online business and bring more traffic to its restaurants. "As Levy continues to pursue its aggressive growth strategy, we will look to ways to build upon our solution to support our business," Weber says. "It's all about differentiating ourselves in the market and treating our customers better."

Microsoft Windows Server System

The Microsoft Windows Server System integrated server infrastructure software is designed to support end-to-end solutions built on the Microsoft Windows Server™ 2003 operating system. It creates an infrastructure based on integrated innovation, Microsoft's holistic approach to building products and solutions that are intrinsically designed to work together and interact seamlessly with other data and applications across your IT environment. This allows you to reduce the costs of ongoing operations, deliver a more secure and reliable IT infrastructure, and drive valuable new capabilities for the future growth of your business.

For more information about Windows Server System, go to: www.microsoft.com/windowsserversystem

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