Bluewater shopping centre – Umbraco retailer communications extranet

Bluewater's extranet was out of date and increasingly in need of improvement. It was awkward and time consuming to update, and crucial retailer information was hard to find. By taking a user-centric, agile and structured approach to design, content and functionality, Blueprint delivered an extranet that made an immediate transformational impact and increased usage by over 400% in the first 30 days.

Bluewater in Kent is one of the largest shopping centres in Europe, covering a vast 240-acre site, including 154,000 m2 of retail space. Every year, around 27 million people visit its 330 shops, 40 cafes and restaurants, and 13-screen cinema.

With so many separate businesses under one roof, effective communication and engagement with all stakeholders – retailers, café/restaurant managers, employees – was essential.

A vital tool in meeting these challenges was the extranet. Since opening its doors in 1999, the Bluewater central management team had relied on an extranet as one of its main communication tools with retailers and other stakeholders. The existing system had been in place for over seven years, but it had become increasingly clear that it was no longer fit for purpose. It was poorly designed, hard to update, lacked critical functionality and made it difficult to engage with retailers.

The extranet served a dual purpose as both an operational and a promotional tool. Operationally, it was the repository for a series of critical compliance documents. These included the Retailers' Handbook containing vital information for retailers on key policies and procedures, such as fire procedures, health safety policies and security matters.

Retailers needed fast, easy access to the Handbook on a regular basis, but its existing PDF format was cumbersome and slow. The information was there, but it was hard to find – and there was no search function. In addition, every time something in the Handbook changed, the whole Word document behind it had to be updated and reformatted by the Bluewater central marketing team.

The extranet was also a critical promotional channel, enabling Bluewater central marketing team to keep retailers informed about forthcoming promotions and opportunities to promote their brand within the shopping centre. But visually, the extranet looked out of date and out-moded. There was no content management system (CMS), making it hard to maintain and update information, and even relatively simple tasks required significant technical support.

The difficulty in publishing content and communicating with retailers about forthcoming promotions, performance updates, or scheduled works, for example, meant that opportunities were being lost and there was a risk that retailers were losing confidence in the system.

Blueprint's combination of innovative ideas, in-depth technical knowledge and user-centric design has earned it a fast-growing reputation as a web development agency that bridges the gap between IT and marketing – making it an ideal partner for Bluewater.

Blueprint recognised that there were two priorities for the new extranet – it had to have the functionality necessary to work as an effective operational and promotional tool; and it needed to combine this with a visually appealing, easy-to-use interface in order to win buy-in from retailers.

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The first step was a 'discovery phase'. This involved a series of one-to-one and group interviews during which key stakeholders at Bluewater – including retailer representatives – were asked about their opinions on the current extranet and how it could be improved.

Based on this feedback, a fully-clickable wireframe prototype was rapidly developed using the latest lean and agile design tools, such as MockFlow. This enabled both the client and the Blueprint team to review functionality and feed in comments on the new system design at an early stage, allowing the prototype to be further refined.

By the time the new system reached the development phase, therefore, it had already gone through considerable user review, discovery and testing to ensure it would deliver what was required.

"...the most engaging system available anywhere for retailers and their landlords."

Early on in the process, the Umbraco content management platform was identified as the best option for meeting Bluewater's needs. Blueprint is a certified Umbraco partner and knew that this powerful, flexible CMS would integrate well with Bluewater's existing Microsoft technology and systems, such as databases and other asset management tools.

The next stage was to implement a Scrum approach to system development. Scrum is an iterative and incremental agile software development framework for managing product development. With Scrum, the focus is on iteratively developing specific features at relatively short intervals so the client can see the process moving forward. It makes it easier to facilitate gradual improvement and ongoing feedback, with each iteration being a progression on the one before.

Scrum facilitates working in iterative cycles of planning, developing and testing. It breaks the work down into bite-size chunks of features, focusing on the quality of each feature in turn, rather than presenting the client with multiple features at the same time. It leads to a much higher quality overall system.

The transformational impact of the new system was maximised by ensuring the look and feel of the user interface, and the extranet's usability in general, reflected the technical innovation and quality of the system that underpinned it.

The Blueprint team dramatically improved the speed in which retailers could access information by leveraging Umbraco's CMS flexibility to implement a structured content approach to publishing and updating information. The whole site was also made fully searchable. And the responsive design, meanwhile, meant retailers could access the extranet on the go, including invaluable data like footfall, sales figures and lost property records, as well as being kept up to date with forthcoming promotional opportunities.

Thanks to the rapid, agile approach to research and development implemented by Blueprint, the core wire-framing, Umbraco development and user-focused design of the new extranet was completed within 9 months.

The new extranet went live on 12 August 2014 – and the results were immediate. In the first month after launch alone, use of the Bluewater extranet increased by over 400%.

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