



North East Regional Development Authority Powers One of UK's Largest Government Sites

Overview

A UK regional development authority turns to a Web development firm with government experience to revamp its Web site, porting thousands of pages and completing the project on budget in just eight weeks. This public sector agency drives interest and economic development in England's North East region, positioning the area as a desirable and burgeoning area to live and do business. With an integrated content management system from Ektron, the regional authority overcame huge limitations to efficiently publish adequate volumes of relevant content. Today, the site attracts more than 80,000 visits per month.

Developer



Since 1995 Indigo Multimedia has been working within the public and private sectors, offering innovative design and technology. Indigo understand the importance of good relationships and provides solutions with a real return on your investment. Clients include DfES, Adidas, Shell LiveWIRE, Shell UK, UK Sport, Learning Skill Councils and Connexions Partnerships.

Organisation



The Regional Development Agency (RDA) ONE NorthEast is one of several UK governmental bodies focused on economic development of a targeted geographic area in England. To support its goals, the organisation launched a fully-owned subsidiary company called the North East Regional Portal 2001 Ltd (TNERP.) With its Web site, www.n-e-life.com, TNERP has championed electronic information delivery and communication for more than three years, advancing beyond traditional Web initiatives among many public sector organisations. The “n-e-life.com” Web site successfully links a network of partners with one another and the world, including businesses, residents, government agencies, and other organisations. RDA ONE relies on the site to generate demand for information about its region's business, culture, and entertainment -- to promote regional initiatives, and to drive quality traffic to partner Web sites. The site is becoming an international ‘hub’ for North East businesses to interact and trade with businesses globally.

Challenge

“As a gateway for the North East of England, www.n-e-life.com must represent the region in a positive, professional and engaging manner. We handle an immense volume of material for our partners, including links, features, news, white papers, images, and so on,” says chief executive Norma Foster.

Content management was a challenge because adding new content to the site required physical input using HTML code, she explains. Content could not be tagged with metadata or an expiry date, and images were difficult to add. The site often looked outdated and bland. Articles and information were difficult to find. Certain areas of the site required updating by a third party. Errors were made and deadlines were missed.

“This approach simply could not provide the flexibility and ease we needed to create pages and publish content,” Norma states. “It severely hindered our main aims and objectives.”

TNERP followed governmental requirement to put development of their new site out to tender (RFI.) In mid-July 2004, several Web development firms pitched for the business. Indigo Multimedia was chosen to deliver the new site with focus on:

- redeveloping the existing site and having the new site running within less than nine weeks
- importing 15,000+ documents and pages, ideally with automatic indexing and metadata creation
- enabling both technical and non-technical staff to update content
- incorporating online applications (e.g. online payment, electronic tender) to foster interactivity
- providing a structure for running additional Web sites in the future.

Result

Norma says that “with Ektron’s CMS powering their site, n-e-life.com is proud to have a “clearly defined, easy-to-navigate, good-looking Web presence, which looks fresh, interesting and relevant at all times.” The site can hold huge volumes of relevant content and images, she says, adding that their ability to publish content as required creates “a feeling of the site being constantly refreshed and updated on a ‘live’ basis.”

TNERP has a vision to enhance the site’s power and the visitor experience by adding new RSS feeds, Web TV and radio events, calendars, online forms, and multilingual content. Ektron CMS400.NET is equipped to support these initiatives.

According to Norma, “immediate savings were realised with the introduction of the Ektron CMS.” She calls pricing “extremely reasonable” and says the impact in terms of staff productivity is “immense.”

“Productivity has increased dramatically,” Norma explains. “The structure of the Ektron system lends itself to project management which allows for efficient planning and execution of publishing schedules. Permission levels and workflow features allow our regional portal team to publish more content than ever. There’s also been a positive impact on the morale of the team who had to contend with a difficult system in the past. Ektron’s system is very user-friendly and approachable regardless of the technical knowledge of the writers. Time is now spent on productive and creative activities as opposed to heavy admin duties.”

Visitor feedback has been positive, thanks in large part, Norma says, to the new portal being better suited for interaction. “Our team can provide relevant and attractive content to a wide audience, and customer satisfaction has increased tremendously,” she says. “By delivering a better service, the positioning of our organisation has also been boosted -- with increased recognition amongst major regional stakeholders.”

According to Norma, TNERP plans to market and sell their smart portal solution to government offices, communities and businesses, including an eye toward markets beyond the UK.

“We’re currently focused in the UK,” Norma states, “but will soon add a comprehensive section about international trade -- to support UK businesses in learning more about exporting, and a route to market for businesses abroad. We’ll introduce multilingual content in the near future, which will encourage use of n-e-life.com by businesses of other nationalities. We plan to signpost international businesses looking for fully comprehensive portal solutions. This will strengthen our role as a gateway to the North East of England and support activities in terms of attracting overseas visitors and inward investors.”

Norma says their commercial team has “clear goals:” joining with their development partner, Indigo Multimedia, to approach European countries with bespoke portal solutions using the Ektron CMS. “A platform to efficiently accommodate multilingual content is essential,” she states.

“Our new site, www.n-e-life.com, has met our overall business goals and, without doubt, this has been facilitated by the introduction of the Ektron CMS. What’s more, we can now plan long-term strategies for evolving our own site and our delivery of regional portal solutions to others.”

For additional information:

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N-E-Life.com: Developer Notes

Indigo Multimedia built their own PHP/MySQL-based content management system, now implemented in several organisations across the UK. They've also implemented Macromedia Contribute for a number of clients who required what they refer to as a "lightweight CMS." When evaluating CM solutions for www.n-e-life.com, Indigo turned to Ektron based upon the company's reputation in the CMS and content editing tools space, as well as Ektron's keen understanding of developer needs.

According to project manager, Ryan Foster, Indigo chose Ektron based on several factors, including:

- Low cost of ownership – highly competitive licensing
- Functionality comparable to a CMS at twice the price or more
- Clear and easy to understand licensing.

"Public sector sites face governmental requirements such as e-GIF, e-GMS capability, Dublin Core standards, AAA accessibility, Bobby Approval and beyond," says Ryan. "With Ektron's approach to XML, metadata tagging and other functions, developers can meet these requirements without hassle."

Ektron made "technical sense" based upon several factors, Ryan says, including:

- Extendable via API
- Rapid development; non-proprietary development environment
- Support for multiple database types -- Access, MySQL, SQL & Oracle 9i
- XML-based approach -- important for public sector interoperability and eGIF compliancy
- Ease-of-use -- Ryan describes that multiple content types and content entry are all managed by in single WYSIWYG environment
- Open Architecture -- "Ektron code" can sit alongside any other component code on a page, giving the developer freedom to use other software with the CMS (forums, shopping carts etc.)
- Compliance with legacy technologies, including the Oracle database used by n-e-life

Indigo also liked Ektron's support for PHP, the firm's main development language. Ryan quickly points out the firm's diversification into .NET, partly to take advantage of Ektron's newest features in their native .NET solution and also in response to customer demand.

"This system enabled us to develop many different display components using Ektron functions, such as collections and XML content blocks," Ryan states. "Development is easy and site administration is easy for the end-users. With options for scheduling content start and stop dates, we built a user interface that dynamically refreshes and updates with minimum effort. This dramatically increases the site administrator's productivity and efficiency"

According to Ryan, Indigo's business is split across two sectors, with approximately 20% focused on DVD/CD-ROM authoring and 80% focused on Web design and development. Of the 80%, more than half includes CMS deployment.

"Ektron supports our CMS proposition," Ryan says. "Indigo offers Ektron as an attractive, out-of-the-box CMS based on an established product with a proven track record of many implementations across the world. Partnering with Ektron allows us to remain very competitive when tendering for projects. We deliver a lot of functionality for an attractive price, and because Ektron has no hidden licensing costs, we can have confidence in our budget estimates."

Ryan concludes: "By implementing a third party CMS, we offer clients the benefits of Ektron's developer training and the Ektron developer network. The end customer is not tied down to a particular agency, thus risk is reduced. Indigo can implement the CMS, but the long-term management of the Web site can be bought in-house. For a core business system like a Web site, this is attractive option for both business professionals and in-house IT staff in our end customer organisations."

Indigo Multimedia highlights the following project requirements for the NE Life project:

Multiple content channels: CMS support for three channels (business, citizen, visitor.) Each channel template must use the same structure, but incorporate a different color scheme (controlled with style sheets)

Basic personalisation: Site visitors should be able to select one of the three channel main pages as their default n-e-life home page for subsequent visits

Channel and sectional navigation: Ability to add/remove sections on the main channel navigation; ability to list all subsections under a selected channel section

Breadcrumb trail: Dynamically generated to show path to current page

Search engine: search current channel by keyword; advanced search across all channels

Data classification/knowledge management for search: based on TNERP metadata and eGIF schema

Channel admin: create components for consistent display on the main channel template

Feature box display: including combination of title, URLx3 and/or image; random generation from pre-defined list if not specified by admin.

Lead article display: with photograph, headline and teaser text with style-sheet controls for user-editable teaser text formatting; random generation from pre-defined list if not specified by admin.

NOTE: Feature box and lead article admin developed via an XML content block using the CMS calendar object, enabling random/random override AND scheduling functionality

News feed from external site, using RSS

Events listing

Advertising: TNERP and affiliate advertising display, and support for ad tracking; binding of adverts to particular site sections (uses Ektron “collections” function to create groups of adverts associated with each channel; admins can specify adverts at page-level using meta data)

Sitemap: Dynamically generated to show all sections and pages of site

Link checking: centralised management of external Web links; automatic link checking including broken link reporting

Mini Web site: including database, search, and admin

Flexible workflow: standard and ad-hoc for creating, editing and approving/publishing content

Content scheduling: activation/deactivation of content at set dates

Oracle database to store CMS content

Integration with current office environment for calendaring, scheduling, and email

W3C/WIA compliancy: text-only version of the site, with W3C Priority 1 compliant templates

Baseline browser: IE5.5+/Netscape 7 running on a PC

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