



Northumbrian Water Achieves Integrated Approach to Web Management

OpenText Web Site Management helps build a flexible web platform for the future

Industry

Utility

Customer



Business Challenges

- As the company stakeholders become more technologically astute, Northumbrian Water has to become more sophisticated in their communications strategies to meet this demand
- Stringent targets from water industry regulator OFWAT to respond even more efficiently to customer requests
- Separately managed sites made it difficult to update content and costly to administer
- There was no consistent look and feel across sites, and some of the corporate branding was inconsistent

Business Solution

- OpenText Web Site Management

Business Results

- New sites are more user-friendly and modern looking
- New functionality has been added to the sites, including a e-billing mechanism. Customers can also search based on the area they live in to find out about maintenance work taking place in their area
- New sites form a flexible web platform that can be developed in the future to accommodate new content and new functionality

Northumbrian Water Group plc is a water and waste water services company with its head office in Durham, UK. Quoted on the FTSE 250 index of the London Stock Exchange, the group includes Northumbrian Water Limited, which provides water and sewerage services in the North-East under the brand name Northumbrian Water; water services in the South-East under the Essex and Suffolk Water brand; Property Solutions, which undertakes searches for homeowners and solicitors about water-related issues that might affect a house purchase; and a number of waste water management and environmental consultancy operations in the UK and abroad.

Northumbrian Water operated four different websites, which were all hosted and maintained externally through third-party suppliers. The company decided to reassess its approach and to create sites that could be more easily updated in-house and would give a more consistent look and feel across its operations. Designed by TH_NK and powered by OpenText Web Site Management, Northumbrian Water has re-launched all four websites, which are now hosted and maintained by one supplier, TH_NK. The sites are already receiving a warm welcome from consumers and staff alike.

Business challenge

Online communications have become an important part of the group's overall communications strategy. Consumers and business customers increasingly expect to be able to transact online with utility companies, while online communications have become more and more crucial for other stakeholders, such as investors, shareholders, and press contacts. "As our stakeholders become more technologically astute, we have to become more sophisticated in our communications strategy to meet this demand," says Lesley Brown, IT Project Manager at Northumbrian Water.

Meanwhile, the company is subject to stringent targets from water industry regulator, The Water Services Regulation Authority (OFWAT), around response times to its customers.

If it can move more of its interactions with customers online, it can respond even more efficiently to customer requests.

Previously, the group operated four websites for different parts of its business all under separate contracts. There were sites for Northumbrian Water Group; Northumbrian Water Ltd; Essex and Suffolk Water; Property Solutions; and links to a recruitment site. The disparate nature of the group's online presence created a number of difficulties.

"Having the sites managed separately made it difficult to update content and made them costly to administer," says Brown. "There was no consistent look and feel across the sites and some of the corporate branding was inconsistent."





“Staff say that the new sites are excellent and are so much more user friendly and modern looking. We have also had positive feedback from the Consumer Council for Water [the consumer watchdog for the industry].”

Lesley Brown, IT Project Manager at Northumbrian Water

Solution

In January 2006, the group decided to review its online strategy from a design, information structure, and content management point of view. Following a competitive tender, it enlisted the services of TH_NK, a Newcastle-based digital marketing agency, and OpenText, an enterprise content management firm, to redesign the sites and to find and implement a suitable Content Management System (CMS) to support them.

Northumbrian Water wanted to improve the user experience across all its sites, and in particular to simplify navigation, as there were too many layers to drill down before visitors got the information they required. From a content management point of view, it was essential that non-technical staff could publish new information quickly and easily without relying on the IT department or an external web agency.

“Previously, if there was an incident, for example a major pipe burst in the region, it might take some time to get information updated on the relevant website as we would need to contact our communications department to do this. We wanted to be able to get such information out quickly, empowering our staff to create and publish content themselves,” says Brown.

Northumbrian Water and TH_NK held discovery workshops to explore ideas with staff and to examine what users were looking for from the sites. TH_NK then road mapped all the information requirements for the sites, designed a structure for them, and came up with creative treatments. The organisation also worked with Northumbrian Water to develop essential and “nice-to-have” criteria for a CMS.

As well as a user-friendly interface for non-technical staff, Northumbrian Water wanted a CMS with robust workflow to track the creation, approval, and publishing process through its various stages. It was also important that the system could integrate with the company’s document management solution.

Northumbrian Water and TH_NK requested information from six content management vendors, and then drew up a shortlist of three. Three companies were invited to the workshops where technical and non-technical staff from Northumbrian Water were able to give their verdict on each product through the use of evaluation sheets.

The evaluation sheets were assessed against the key criteria set by Northumbrian Water, and OpenText Web Site Management was chosen to support its sites. “Ease of use was the main factor in the choice of OpenText, as our staff found the solution so intuitive and user-friendly,” says Brown. “Other factors included the workflow functionality, the integration with our document management solution, and the fact that, unlike some of the other solutions, OpenText was able to produce DDA-compliant web pages [compliant with the Disability Discrimination Act’s guidelines on accessibility for visually impaired and disabled web users].”

OpenText conducted a week’s technical training for Northumbrian Water and TH_NK. TH_NK was responsible for implementing the CMS, which was fairly straightforward.

“We had a lot of support from OpenText while implementing the solution,” says Ryan Hall, Account Director at TH_NK for Northumbrian Water Group. “OpenText supported and guided us throughout and was on hand to tackle any software glitches we experienced.”

“We have only been back to OpenText twice for support, as the system is so intuitive and easy to understand,” says Brown.

The biggest challenge of the whole project was the pure volume of information that had to be integrated into the sites. Some content had to be revised, while new areas, such as media, educational resources for schools, and careers, had to be created from scratch.

Results

The final three new sites went live in January 2007: the Northumbrian Water Group site; Northumbrian Water Ltd; and Essex and Suffolk Water. The Property Solutions site, which was redesigned about a



year ago, will be brought on to the Web Site Management platform in 2007, whilst recruitment information (formerly on a stand-alone site) has been integrated into the main sites.

Although it is early days, the sites have already had good feedback both internally and externally. "Staff say that the new sites are excellent and are so much more user-friendly and modern-looking," says Brown. "We have also had positive feedback from the Consumer Council for Water [the consumer watchdog for the industry]."

As well as new content, new functionality has been added to the sites. There is an e-billing mechanism, which allows customers to view their bills online. Meanwhile, customers can do searches based on the area they live in to find out about maintenance works taking place in their area or community activities that Northumbrian Water and Essex and Suffolk Water are involved in. There is also a new careers section, and applications for vacancies can now be submitted online.

The new sites are also more secure, as Northumbrian Water purchased its own hardware on which to host the websites as part of the project.

Possible developments for the future include the setting up of a user group, which will include representation from around the business. "The redesigned sites have created a lot of enthusiasm among staff, who are always coming up with ideas for new content and functionality," says Brown. "We want to take advantage of these ideas by setting up a user group to set priorities for future improvements."



Ultimately, the overhaul of the sites has achieved the group's overall aim—to build a flexible web platform that can be developed in the future to accommodate new content and new functionality. "We have achieved that and more," concludes Brown.

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