



Major Cosmetics Producer Deploys Microsoft Search Technology to Increase Efficiency

Overview

Country or Region: Global

Industry: Cosmetics

Customer Profile

Mary Kay Inc. has more than 1.6 million Independent Beauty Consultants in well over 30 global markets, making it one of the world's largest direct sellers of skin care and color cosmetics.

Business Situation

Mary Kay's custom intranet search technology was not providing adequate value for its corporate users, who had difficulty locating information in a timely manner. Few employees used the search function, relying instead on manual processes and individual knowledge to find the forms and information they needed.

Solution

Mary Kay implemented Microsoft Office SharePoint Server 2007 on a 2-server farm, indexing the portal itself as well as downstream documents and information. Mary Kay's IT department built a custom, streamlined user interface and configured Office SharePoint Server 2007.

Benefits

- Dramatically improved employees' ability to find documents and information
- Increased worker efficiency while searching for and locating documents
- Provided a search system that requires little effort to manage and administer once implemented

“In two and a half years of working here, I never found anything using the search feature that was in place before. Now I find 80% of what I'm looking for on the first try.”

Kristi Maynor, Project Lead, Mary Kay Inc.

Mary Kay Inc, one of the largest direct selling skin care and color cosmetics companies in the world, was without a viable enterprise search application. After moving its U.S. portal to Microsoft® SharePoint® Portal Server 2003, the company decided to upgrade to Microsoft Office SharePoint Server 2007 to leverage the content indexing and search platform functionality. The company now has robust, easy-to-use search functionality that will scale along with its global IT improvement and integration efforts.



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—Kristi Maynor, Project Lead, Mary Kay Inc.

Situation

Founded in 1963, Mary Kay Inc. is one of the largest direct sellers of skin care and color cosmetics in the world. Four thousand-plus corporate employees support more than 1.6 million Independent Beauty Consultants in well over 30 markets around the world. These consultants sell Mary Kay products directly to consumers. This model generated more than \$2.2 billion in wholesale revenues in 2005 alone and has averaged double-digit annual growth since the company's inception.

Mary Kay takes an active approach to IT, constantly looking for ways to improve its business through the intelligent application of technology. The company relies largely on Microsoft products and solutions to achieve these goals. For example, Mary Kay's U.S. headquarters recently completed a migration to Microsoft SharePoint Portal Server 2003 for its intranet portal and collaboration platform. They are also continuing to roll out Microsoft Live Communications Server® 2005 for messaging and presence awareness capabilities. In the long run, the company plans to integrate its regional offices—already part of one Active Directory® forest—into a single large portal based on SharePoint technologies.

The Need for a Scalable Search Solution

Despite viewing IT as a strategic asset, the company's search technology—a holdover from its previous, custom-built intranet—was not providing users with the results they needed. Frequently, finding a document involved asking another employee who knew where to look, even if that meant going to another floor or building. Finding the most basic documents—like vacation requests or procurement forms—was a challenge, resulting in wasted time and lost productivity.

"When I first got here a year and a half ago, I quickly realized that internal search was

ineffective. I tried to search for a couple of things and couldn't find them, so I just stopped using it," said Obe Salahuddin, head developer of the Mary Kay Portal Team. "It was clearly a problem that needed to be addressed."

Jeff Coble, Senior Technical Engineer and member of the Mary Kay Collaboration Team, said, "We had not developed a strategy for search. We were just using the out-of-the-box search functions from Windows Server® 2003, which is a straight index—not a true search engine. Relevance was a big problem. Sometimes it was just easier to click through the pages of our intranet to find what you were looking for."

Search as Strategy

Beyond day-to-day efficiency, the company also recognized the strategic value of getting high-quality search up and running. Kristi Maynor, Project Lead for Mary Kay's deployment of Office SharePoint Server 2007, gave two examples: "For one thing, our procurement process is very manual—workers have to physically walk documents from floor to floor, and the process can take ten days to complete. Being able to locate and share documents electronically will cut that time in half." She continued, "We also want to be able to make better use of our 43 years of organizational knowledge, learning from our previous projects to help create better products in the future. Search is an integral part of these efforts."

Mary Kay's new intranet search engine not only had to immediately enhance day-to-day business operations but, eventually, be used as part of its efforts to integrate IT across regional offices. The search platform chosen by the company therefore needed to have robust basic functionality out of the box, along with the ability to scale to a larger, multilingual environment in the future.

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--Jeff Coble, Senior Technical Engineer, Mary Kay Inc.

Choosing a Solution

The next step was to decide on a platform. Even though Mary Kay is a Microsoft shop, the IST department did consider options other than Office SharePoint Server 2007 for their new enterprise search platform.

"Google was one of the main competitors," Coble said. "It gets the job done, but we felt that Office SharePoint Server 2007 integrated more seamlessly with our existing Microsoft technologies. In the long run, we plan to continue development on the Microsoft platform, and Office SharePoint Server 2007 fits in that picture." There were other reasons, as well. Mary Kay's extensive in-house .NET development capability and the ease of use of that platform meant that they could shape their SharePoint solution to fit their needs. Also, they wanted to capitalize on the ease with which Office SharePoint Server 2007 interacts with the other Microsoft productivity and infrastructure products already in use at Mary Kay.

Although the company was already using SharePoint Portal Server 2003, decision-makers were excited about using the advanced features of Office SharePoint Server 2007 as a part of larger IT efforts. Deep integration with the client applications Information Workers were already familiar with was also crucial. Also, they appreciated the ability to buy a single server technology that provided search capabilities integrated into an entire information management solution.

The Deployment Process

Part of the solution's success relied on the intelligent reorganization of the intranet content universe. A taxonomy team was formed and worked to identify documents and information that needed to be indexed and made available to users. The result was a comprehensive information architecture and

reorganization, covering forms and other documents as well as information related to the portal itself.

The software environment at Mary Kay made implementing Office SharePoint Server 2007 relatively easy, as the company was already using Active Directory, Windows Server 2003, Windows XP and Microsoft Office 2003. Coble's team added two new servers which index content and provide results to end users. One of the two was set up as the index server. Both devices provide front-end services load-balanced with an F5* BigIP* device.

What's more, they found the software easy to use. "The interface of Office SharePoint Server 2007 is simple for such a big application—there's a bit of a learning curve, but not enough to slow us down," Coble said.

Setting the crawl and indexing parameters was the next step. The IST team used the taxonomy and content sources themselves as a basic map. Then, they performed thorough test indexing, fine-tuning the crawl rules to capture everything they needed indexed and excluding some extraneous material. They were guided by the objective of providing an effective, easy-to-use search feature that could be up and running quickly, which meant temporarily skipping over some of the advanced features Office SharePoint Server 2007.

"Currently, the indexing server is covering only files and links that don't have restricted permissions associated with them," Coble pointed out. "Of course, the application allows you to set user rights down to the document level, and we did spend time testing that feature in preparation for the future." Mary Kay plans to implement permission-based search results soon.

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—Kristi Maynor, Project Lead, Mary Kay Inc.

Salahuddin's team was responsible for customizing the user interface with ASP.NET 2.0 and Web Parts. While the out-of-the-box search interface provided by SharePoint Server 2007 provides all that many customers will ever need, Mary Kay appreciated the ability to customize it to fit their employees' needs. "From the user's perspective," Salahuddin said, "the search feature appears as a simple box in the menu bar on every intranet page. The user simply types in search keywords, and an inline box pops up, presenting the search results. The user interface calls the search service behind the scenes and delivers the results right there on the page so that users don't have to stop what they are doing to search for something." Currently, Mary Kay's custom UI does not provide users with the option to tune their search parameters, but the company plans to provide them access to the sophisticated search customization features of SharePoint 2007 in the near future.

Business Benefits—Now and Tomorrow

The service went live in June 2006. So far, the response has been very positive. "In two and a half years of working here, I never found a single document using the prior search feature. Now I find 80 percent of what I'm looking for," Maynor said. Mary Kay's thorough pre-installation content reorganization and taxonomy work was an important factor in this success, but the search feature of Office SharePoint Server 2007 is providing the relevant results and ease-of-use the company was seeking.

Mary Kay plans to quantify the return-on-investment (ROI) provided by the new technology, but in the meantime, the business benefits are obvious. As Maynor put it, "Being fast is important. The more we can reduce redundant, time-consuming tasks, the more competitive we are."

The combination of the simple user interface with the effective indexing capabilities of Office SharePoint Server 2007 has meant rapid adoption and frequent use of the solution. Coble reiterates, "We can tell from the Office SharePoint Server 2007 management console what people are searching for and how often, so we know people are using it on a regular basis. As IT professionals, the fact that we don't hear from them about it demonstrates to us that it's working."

Employees are now able to quickly find holiday schedules, forms, benefits information and company data. What's more, the ITS group is finding that the technology requires little day-to-day administration. "We do very little day-to-day hands-on monitoring of the server," Coble said; "It's not necessary. Of course, we're not really taxing it at this point, but we're pretty confident that it will be manageable as we build out the other capabilities and scale up the number of users."

Focused on the Future

Mary Kay has big plans for Office SharePoint Server 2007 as a part of its global portal initiative, including:

- Enhancing the user interface. As Salahuddin explained, "Users only have a text box, which is nice because it's simple to use and easy to manage. However, we would eventually like to provide them with the ability to customize their searches and interact with the data more."
- Setting up more "people search" functionality, allowing employees to find the internal knowledge resources they need to complete projects.
- Expanding the index to include permission-restricted documents, databases, file shares beyond the intranet site itself, and, eventually, the entire Mary Kay Inc. information ecosystem.

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- Expanding the types of information indexed by using identity-based search that hides restricted documents if the user does not have permission to view them.
- Integrating search with line-of-business applications to enhance marketing ROI tracking.
- Providing multilingual indexing and user interfaces for international partners.

Conclusion

Mary Kay's deployment of Office SharePoint Server 2007 demonstrates that it can serve enterprise search needs from the basic to the highly sophisticated. Continuing a longstanding and mutually beneficial relationship, Mary Kay Inc. turned to Microsoft for a search solution that could be customized and deployed rapidly, yet eventually scale to provide advanced search functions to thousands of international users. Mary Kay found Office SharePoint Server 2007 easy to customize using the widely familiar .NET development environment. They also found it easy to install and manage. At the same time, Office SharePoint Server 2007 provides highly granular permission-based indexing and document control, advanced multilingual search capabilities and a host of other cutting-edge features, many of which Mary Kay plans to use in the future.

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