



DANAT

Case Study

Integrated Infrastructure Helps Web Start-up Cut Time to Market from Months to Weeks

After launching an award-winning Arabic news portal, Web start-up Danat decided to launch a number of Web sites for Arabic language users. But it needed a reliable infrastructure to support multiple portals and reduce the need to re-write codes. It also wanted to integrate business processes with the Web sites to automate sales transactions. After considering Web content management systems such as Tridion, Danat implemented an infrastructure based on the Microsoft® family of products which provide advanced user interface and integration features. As a result, its first Web site built on the new system achieved 10,000 visits per day and won advertising contracts from more than 60 top brands in the United Arab Emirates—within just three months of launch. Moreover, Danat predicts that it can reduce time to market for Web sites from months to weeks.

Situation

Since early 1990s, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) has significantly increased its efforts to diversify into non-oil business sectors—especially e-commerce. This is because with the advancement in digital technologies, and Internet users' growing demand to shop from home, e-commerce business is expected to generate a large portion of the country's revenues in the near future. Today, the country has 30 per cent Internet penetration—one of the highest amongst Arab states—and also the highest number of Internet users.

This presents an important opportunity for the local companies to develop their business further. One prime example is Dubai-based Danat. Established in 2005, the company develops and hosts Web portals targeted at niche demographics in Middle Eastern countries. One of its key markets is that of Arabic language users, and in 2007, the service provider launched its first Arabic financial news portal, Argaam.com. This innovative site won the Golden Award in the 2007 UAE Web Awards for excellence in Web design and development in the financial institutions category. The same year, it also won the Microsoft Award for the Best Web Site Built on Microsoft Technology.

Encouraged by the success of Argaam.com, Danat decided to launch three more portals by the end of 2008. The first one, Logta.com, provides information on discount deals from retailers in the UAE and Saudi Arabia. The second, laazi.com, is a jobs and recruitment portal customised for this region. The third one is Beezat.com, a classifieds and community portal. Anup Thomas, IT Manager at Danat, says: "At the moment, there is no major e-commerce portal for Arabic users in this region. Logta.com was our first step towards filling this gap in the market."

But before Danat embarked on the development processes, it closely re-examined the architecture of Argaam and realised that to meet a target of launching additional sites, it required a more reliable infrastructure. Thomas says: "We had developed our first portal as a customised application using the Microsoft® .NET Framework and Microsoft SQL Server® 2005 database management system. But for our future projects, we needed to establish an infrastructure that could support multiple portals, and help developers to quickly create Web sites without having to re-write all the code from scratch."

Another key requirement was to have automated administrative processes that could track sales and purchasing transactions on the Web site. Thomas says: "Most Web sites available on the Internet today have a powerful user interface, but content and finance management is done offline—which delays the completion of customer transactions. We wanted to gain a competitive advantage by helping retailers buy advertising space online and completing all the financial tasks in real time."



Solution

Thomas and his team conducted a comprehensive review of the technology options available on the market, including a Web content management solution by Netherlands-based SDL Tridion. He says: “We finally chose to build the new infrastructure using Microsoft technologies. Tridion couldn’t match all our requirements, such as handling complex calculations, and we would have had to add plug-ins to perform these complex calculations—raising the system management cost. Moreover, availability of technical support and expertise on Microsoft technologies in the Middle East is more widely available than most other solutions on the market. This was very important to help our staff to efficiently manage the new system.”

Early in 2006, when it developed Argaam.com, Danat had signed a Microsoft Enterprise Licensing Agreement for low cost volume licensing of software, as well as a Microsoft Premier Support Agreement for 93 calendar-days of technical support. The arrangement proved beneficial for the company as it could quickly start working with a Microsoft Technical Account Manager to design the new service-oriented architecture. The key technologies used are:

- Microsoft Office SharePoint® Server 2007—to build the Internet portal
- Microsoft Commerce Server 2007—for providing e-commerce services such as advertisement delivery, campaign management, product catalogue management, and e-mail alerts to users Microsoft Dynamics® CRM 3.0—
- Customer relationship management solution to provide an intranet portal for staff to manage customers interactions and sales process
- Microsoft Dynamics® GP 9.0—business accounting software to automate finance management processes
- Microsoft BizTalk® Server 2006—business process integration system to help all the above technologies work together

The implementation team consisted of Microsoft technicians, the Danat in-house IT team of 15 people, as well as four application developers and a dedicated project manager provided by KalSoft—a Microsoft Gold Certified Partner and Microsoft Small Business specialist. Graham McIntyre, General Manager—Gulf, KalSoft, says: “A project of this scale takes about one year to complete. But in the case of Danat, the team worked round the clock and took the system live in just seven months.”

The Administrative Processes

Microsoft Gold Certified Partner and an expert in implementing Microsoft Business Solutions, BayaNet implemented Microsoft Dynamics GP at Danat. It is integrated with the business applications on the Internet portal as well as with the Microsoft Dynamics CRM solution.

Advertisers who wish to post their special offers on Logta.com send a request to Danat through the electronic forms on the Web site. Based on their industry, Microsoft Dynamics CRM forwards the request to an appropriate sales executive, who ensures that the customer fulfils all requirements and registers him or her on the database.

On the other hand, when a returning advertiser buys ad space and time slots on Logta.com, Commerce Server 2007 analyses the existing promotions on that space and the network traffic. It then estimates the marketing time available for that ad space and helps staff to easily schedule advertisements.

The Internet Portal

The Web site Logta.com provides a range of advanced services, including notifications about special offers sent to the end-users through e-mail messages and tools for advertisers to track campaigns. Importantly, the same Web site is available in English as well as Arabic, due to the features of Office SharePoint Server 2007. To meet Arabic users’ content and usability requirements, such as reading from right to left, Danat hired a consultancy to design the site hierarchy and navigation suitably customised for this user base.

The portal directly extracts information from the advertisement delivery system of Commerce Server, which is integrated with the Microsoft Dynamics CRM solution and the database. As a result, the size of the Web pages is small and users can quickly download the data on their Web browsers.

Benefits

Released in February 2008, Logta.com is the first Web site in UAE to provide one-stop-shop promotion deals to users. Hisham Baker, General Manager, Danat says: "Compared to most other competing sites, we provide the best services to our advertisers. No other e-commerce portal comes close to what we have achieved within just three months of launching Logta.com—10,000 visits per day and partnership with more than 165 top brands in the UAE. And the key reason for this success is a reliable infrastructure built on Microsoft technologies." Following the success of Logta.com in the UAE, Danat also launched it in Saudi Arabia in June 2008 and plans to extend it to other countries in the Middle East, such as Qatar and Egypt.

Web Site Attracts 10,000 Visitors per Day

Within three months of launching Logta.com, the number of visitors to the site has grown to 10,000 per day. Baker says: "For the UAE alone, we've seen a 20 per cent per month increase in site visits. We expect this number to go up significantly once we launch the portal in other countries."

Automated Administrative Processes Support Business Growth

A key factor of the portal's success is a reliable administration system that supports the business with automated processes. Hatem Omar, Operations Manager at BayaNet, says: "Due to seamless integration between Microsoft CRM and Microsoft Dynamics GP, top management get a complete view of the portal's progress. Executives can access the automatically generated financial reports through a business portal which is a part of the Microsoft Dynamics GP application and take timely actions to achieve the revenue goals."

Baker adds: "We now have a competitive advantage in the market. By working with Microsoft, we could build an infrastructure that integrates the portal with internal operations and takes care of everything—high-quality user interface, efficient service to the advertisers, and the right tools to increase productivity of the in-house sales and marketing teams."

More Than 165 Top Brands Use Portal Services

By June 2008, more than 60 large retailers in the UAE had partnered with Danat to publish their promotions on Logta.com, including top brands such as Carrefour—the second largest retail group in the world, and Sharaf DG—an international electronic retail chain. "We expect the number of partners to increase three times by 2009," says Baker.

The general manager feels that this phenomenal success was a result of using reliable technology as well as one-to-one interaction with the customers. For each of its advertisers, Danat appoints dedicated account managers who ensure that customers can easily complete transactions on the portal. Moreover, the company also plans to add a tool on the portal for advertisers to calculate the return on investment for their promotions.

Danat Predicts Reduction in Time to Market for Portals from Months to Weeks

The organisation can now quickly build, launch, and manage more Web portals on its new infrastructure as all the required technologies are already in place. Baker says: "Now, for our future projects, we can re-use most of the existing code and only spend time on configuring the out-of-the-box features of SharePoint Server."

"When we built the financial news portal, it took us eight months for planning, developing, and launching it. Now, with the kind of IT environment that's available to us, we can shorten the turnaround time for a Web site to just weeks."

Scalable System Saves Investments, Reduces Operational Costs

Danat plans to launch Logta.com in most countries in the Middle East—especially the Gulf states—by 2010, and believes that the highly scalable infrastructure will easily support the growth in the number of users as well as the content. "For UAE operations, we are only using 25 per cent capacity of the system. It will be cost-effective to expand to other regions as there is no need to make further investments in technology," says Baker. "Importantly, by serving a large user-base on the same infrastructure, we will also experience a significant reduction in the total cost of ownership for the technologies."

Training Support from Vendors Helps IT Team Adopt New Technologies

To help ensure that the Danat IT team could easily manage the system, the technology partners provided intensive training sessions for its in-house technicians. Microsoft conducted workshops on using Commerce Server and BizTalk Server 2006. BayaNet followed the “train the trainer technique” to provide guidance to key users on Microsoft Dynamics GP so they could, in turn, train their team members. Finally, KalSoft organised training on system architecture as well as the entire operations life cycle of the solution.

Moreover, Microsoft also held a two-week training session for Danat developers on building Web sites using the .NET development framework and SharePoint Server. It also appointed an expert team, called the SharePoint rangers, who help developers optimise the code for user interface. Baker says: “SharePoint Server has been traditionally used for building intranet portals. So, Microsoft support was crucial to help developers use the software to create a public-facing, commercial Web site.”

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