

Introduction



Information technology is causing fundamental change in almost every organisation and market-place. The effective application of such technologies has become a key resource central to each organisation's competitive strength. It is capable of setting organisations apart from their competitors allowing them to offer completely new services and products.

Organisations face increasing demands for better quality customer service and a faster response to consumer needs. There is also an increasing demand for high quality information across business organisations so that competencies can be improved in all areas, especially the promotion of products and brands.

This case study focuses on how Bryant Homes has used information technology. It shows how using both an Intranet and the Internet together with interactive multimedia, places Bryant Homes at the forefront of its sector.

When consumers make a purchase today, they have far higher expectations than in the past. They want information that adds to service quality and helps them to make informed choices. In the past, many consumers might simply have looked at price in order to make appropriate comparisons upon which to found their decisions.

Modern customers are much more sophisticated and want extensive comparative information and advice. In this customer-focused environment, organisations need to differentiate themselves from their competitors. Information technology provides the means for delivering significant service improvements.

Use of communication technology

In the housing market, Bryant has been prepared to introduce the latest technologies in order to develop its product, promote the brand and improve its levels of customer service. Such technologies help to:

- make information more available to the customer
- provide the accurate and comprehensive information that customers require
- speed up sales systems make the buying process smoother for customers.

When using the word 'customer' it is important to remember that everyone within an organisation provides a service and that there are 'internal' as well as 'external' customers. The quality of service which reaches the final house buyer is often influenced by the quality of service and the information that members of staff provide for each other. Communication technologies also help to:

- provide information and make it available to all departments within Bryant Homes
- improve the quality and speed of management decisions because managers are better informed.

The Internet and the World Wide Web are currently transforming global communications. It is a global 'network of networks' which can be accessed from a personal computer by means of a modem or telephone link. It enables users from anywhere in the world to communicate and share information quickly and easily. The strength of the Internet is as a cheap and effective way of communicating, together with its use as an advanced research tool.

Forward-thinking business organisations have spotted the potential of the Internet and many, such as Bryant Homes, are using it to develop further the products and services it provides for its customers.

Although the Internet is a well-known word, many large organisations are today developing their own Intranet services, which provide a series of secure communication links within an organisation and selected sites.

An Intranet provides a similar communications function to the Internet but to a limited number of users. For example, it may provide a range of corporate communications, personnel announcements, job vacancies and news bulletins, as well as specialist and technical information. This case study focuses on the



unique use of an Intranet service which helps to sell Bryant Homes properties by helping customers make informed decisions when purchasing a property.

Promotion through an Intranet



Bryant Homes is a large organisation with developments from Scotland to the south coast. Within Bryant Homes, the 13 regional offices and 120 housing developments struggled to maintain accurate and timely information. To avoid any feeling of isolation, the Intranet was set up and opened a whole new vehicle for communication by linking together all 'sales centres' and regional offices with the head office.

The Intranet facility also helps to make the whole buying process quicker and smoother by providing an Internal Sales System. Each sales centre is connected to Bryant Homes' head office and its

solicitors through the Internal Sales System designed to service all customer needs and requirements. Customer details, development details and legal information can all be accessed and processed in a way which improves customer satisfaction. Each site has a personalised Sales System showing the external elevations, selected rooms, floor plans and 'walkaround' for each house type available on that site.

The sharing of information between each development, regional offices and head office, enables staff at Bryant Homes to respond more quickly to the needs of customers and also share best practice through the process of benchmarking. Not everyone has access to the Internet. Therefore, to ensure as wide an audience as possible could be reached, Bryant produced a Bryant Homes Product Portfolio CD-ROM. The CD-ROM used the same format and content as the website and features an 'electronic walkaround' for the majority of house types.

The 'walkaround' facility allows customers to turn through 360 degrees in order to view a room from every angle to provide a true representation of each home with the use of real photography. This provides customers with the opportunity to view a house type for which there is not a show-home on a particular development. On each PC, in every sales centre, Bryant Homes has introduced a corporate screensaver that has moving images reinforcing the Bryant product and brand messages.

Bryant Homes also uses 'virtual reality'. Virtual reality provides a way of both visualising and experiencing something. It is the next best thing to being there. Customers can see what a development will look like before it is completed.

Benefits of a company website

Use of the Internet has become widespread, as more providers allow people access to the system. Increasingly, before making a major purchase, they use it as a source of information and an opportunity to undertake their own consumer research.

Bryant Homes' website was launched at the Evening Standard Homebuyers Show at Olympia, London in March 1999. It is a useful information source and a good starting point for people wishing to purchase a house. It is also a selling tool and an opportunity to increase brand awareness.

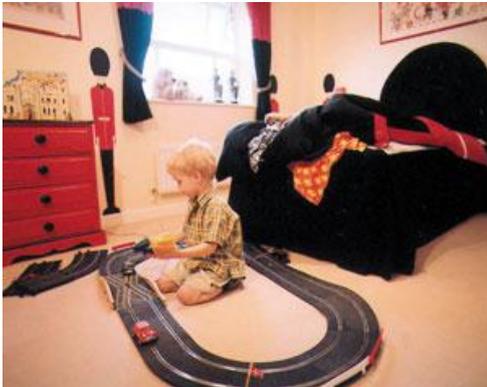
The website's main dedicated system for customers is named 'Homefinder'. Homefinder is a system that will perform a search against consumer needs and requirements to locate a house type and location to suit their lifestyle. It contains images and floor plans of the entire Bryant Homes product portfolio. The information on Homefinder comes directly from a central database and is updated every 24 hours.

Input arrives from all levels within Bryant Homes, i.e. out on site by sales negotiators via the sales system, by sales departments who may want to input prices and also from site staff releasing production dates and targets. Though releasing prices and build dates into the public domain is a brave step, the information is updated daily directly from Bryant Homes' central database.



One of the benefits of 'surfing the web' for customers is that they drive the information, Bryant Homes doesn't tell the user what to look at. It is a good way of issuing press releases and improving the focus of publicity. Bryant Homes' website is also advertising space and is capable of reaching a wider international audience. This is particularly useful for attracting those wishing to relocate to the UK from overseas as such comprehensive information would be difficult to obtain otherwise.

Website functionality



The website was designed on the same platform as the Intranet and the Bryant Homes' product portfolio CD-ROM so that integration between the two was easy. The design planning process for the website took two months and the construction process six weeks. Whilst much of the artwork and design was carried out externally, the website was largely an in-house development which involved the IT and marketing departments within Bryant Homes working closely together. Though it was possible to put a range of interactive multi-media facilities on the website, it was decided to keep the file sizes small so that downloading times could be kept to a minimum.

Monitoring and analysis

An investment in any new facility needs to be monitored. When Internet surfers make a 'hit' (visit to the site) they are providing useful marketing information for the host site. A monitoring and analysis system runs in parallel to the website. The system provides information on:

- the country of origin of the enquiry
- the most popular area of the website
- the least popular area of the website
- individual 'sessions'
- the duration of a typical 'session'
- the number of hits
- the number of leads
- the number of sales.

The lead management system

Pursuing a sales opportunity is known as following a 'lead'. When a lead is identified from the website it goes into the lead management system where it is dealt with.

An important benefit of a lead resulting from the website is that customers pre-qualify the lead themselves by indicating the number of bedrooms they require, the price range of the property they are looking for, the type of property, the area of their choice and when they are looking to move. It helps Bryant Homes to respond to the lead by providing focused and targeted information carefully directed to the customer's needs and requirements.

Conclusion

In the middle of an information revolution, holding or providing information has become a key resource and an opportunity to develop competitive advantage. In the housing industry, the Intranet and Internet have become central to the strength of Bryant Homes in meeting the highly specialised needs of increasingly discerning customers who demand higher standards of customer service. It is also a good way to communicate with customers and develop relationship marketing.

These developments continue to place Bryant Homes at the forefront of its sector. The website is an important starting point which enables Bryant Homes to build upon its strengths through presenting an innovative and forward thinking image. It has also enabled Bryant Homes to review the business and look at ways of improving the way that it carries out day-to-day business activities, as well as the way in which it sells homes.

