



Overview

Country: Canada

Industry: Retail

Customer Profile

Brolisport La Source du Sport is a specialized sports retailer located in St. Hyacinthe, Quebec, offering specialized sporting goods aimed at the extreme sports enthusiast.

Business Situation

The sports retailer was looking for a way to maintain the strong sales growth of the previous year, improve customer service, and to more effectively train its staff.

Solution

The Dakis customer service solution provides customers with customized product recommendations, enabling an easier, streamlined purchasing decision process.

Benefits

- Beat development deadlines by 6 months
- Reduced staff training costs
- Anticipated 5% improvement in n annual ski sales over the next five years

Using Microsoft®.NET Technology, La Source du Sport Offers Customers Extreme Customers Service

"The Dakis solution offered cutting edge Microsoft-based technology, at a price I could afford to implement in just one store. There were no other solutions that would give us the flexibility to build one resource which we could give to our staff on a PDA, our customers on an in-store console, as well as an online version for customers to access on the Web."

Andre Brochu, President and Owner, Brolisport La Source du Sport

Following a highly successful year of strong sales, André Brochu, co-owner of Brolisport La Source du Sport, was determined to find a way to keep up the momentum. In an effort to strengthen his leading position in sporting goods sales, he decided to look for a cutting-edge solution to help improve customer service. To meet this need, he turned to Dakis, a Microsoft ISV, to implement a new artificial intelligence solution they were developing. In just a few months, the Dakis team implemented an automated customer relationship solution accessible by a Pocket PC or an in-store console, with the option to add online access. The team beat their implementation goal by six months, getting the solution up and running just in time for the critical ski sales season. Since then, Brochu has not only seen an improvement in customer satisfaction, but his staff is happier too. In addition, he anticipates a five per cent annual increase in sales over the next five years as a result of the solution.



Situation

Broli La Source du Sport is a specialized sports retailer which is located in St. Hyacinthe, Quebec. In 2001, Brolisport joined a buying group known as Source for Sports which had been operating since 1958 and is comprised of over 175 stores across Canada. He joined the group to improve his buying power, and offer his customers the benefits of a small, independently owned store with the buying power of a large chain.

As a smaller, specialized store competing with large, big-box sporting goods chains, Brolisport's success is highly dependent on finding ways to differentiate itself. One of the ways it has done this is by offering high-end, specialized sporting goods aimed at the extreme sports enthusiast, combined with knowledgeable staff offering a high level of customer service.

One of the challenges in dealing with high-end sporting goods is the increasingly technical nature of the products involved. Providing good customer service requires that staff be well-versed in all the products available, so they can clearly explain the benefits of each one and make well-informed recommendations to customers. This need, combined with the inherently high staff turnover in the retail industry, presented an ongoing challenge for Brolisport.

"Many of the products we offer are highly specialized – it could take a couple of years and a significant investment on our part to fully train an employee on all our products," said André Brochu, President and Owner, of Broli La Source du Sport. "This was a huge challenge for us, because so

many of our employees are students who will only work for us for a couple of years at the most. By the time we have fully trained them, they are moving on to work on what they have studied for."

In addition to the highly technical nature of the products, many of the offerings at La Source du Sport carry a high price tag. Before making an investment in these high-end goods, customers want to clearly understand what exactly they are buying, and why it's the right choice for their needs.

Brochu wanted to find a way to provide his staff with the resources they needed to effectively assist customers in making educated decisions when purchasing from his store. In addition, he wanted to improve customer service during peak periods when there might be more customers than staff in the store and in turn, help increase sales. With those goals in mind, Brochu turned to Dakis, a Microsoft technology partner that offered him a leading-edge customer relationship automation solution.

Solution

To meet his goal of maintaining the outstanding sales growth of the previous year, Brochu decided to turn to technology to help provide better service and increase his customers' loyalty. After learning about the Dakis Humanized Expert, Brochu decided it was exactly what he needed.

Built on the Microsoft .NET Framework, Dakis' artificial intelligence system allows a store employee or customers themselves to answer a series of simple questions about the customer's needs. Using that information, the software assesses the pros and cons of different

products available in the store, and provides an independent, third-party assessment of what products best fit their needs. Staff can access all this information with a wireless PDA, while customers can use an in-store console.

"The Dakis solution offered cutting edge Microsoft-based technology, at a price I could afford to implement in just one store," said Brochu. "There were no other solutions that would give us the flexibility to build one resource which we could give to our staff on a PDA, our customers on an in-store console, as well as an online version for customers to access on the Web."

With just weeks to go before the critical ski sales season, Brochu challenged the Dakis team to customize and implement the solution in time – months ahead of their original deadline goal. This was a significant challenge, given the fact that they wanted to access the solution from different hardware platforms – a PDA and a console – with plans to eventually offer the service online. The Dakis team not only met the deadline, they completed the solution ahead of schedule.

"We were faced with a pretty challenging timeline to complete the solution, but with Visual Studio® .NET and ASP.NET, we were able to easily meet these goals," said Christian LaForte, Director of R&D at Dakis. "I've worked with a number of different languages and platforms over the years. This is the first time in my life that I've seen a project of this scale finish ahead of deadline – a whole six months ahead, in fact."

The Dakis solution was developed with Visual Studio .NET taking advantage of

the .NET Framework's deep support for Web services. Running on Windows Server™ 2003 operating system with SQL Server™ 2000, the solution uses XML to expose Web services to a range of interfaces, from online access on a desktop to Windows forms on a Pocket PC.

"Web services are critical to this solution. After seeing how Visual Studio .NET and the .NET Framework integrate with Web services, it was a natural choice for us to build on," said LaForte. "Let's face it, as an engineer, it's all about having fun and developing cool technologies. Using .NET and Web services, we could focus on the business logic of how we could build the best solution, and not spend all our time coding."

Benefits

After one season with the Dakis solution in place for ski sales, Brochu was so impressed with the results, he decided to expand the solution to include information on bicycles. The system has also been launched online, allowing customers to access it through the Internet, before they even leave home.

Cost Effectiveness

One of the key benefits of the Dakis solution is the value it offers Brochu for his investment. As an independent retailer, he needed a solution that would be affordable to implement in just one store, but that could potentially be expanded to the other stores in The Source du Sport chain. Using Microsoft-based technology and software, Dakis was able to offer a complex system at an affordable price, which had the power to scale far beyond the 175 stores in the chain, if necessary.

"Visual Studio .NET allows you to re-use the same code for different platforms, which saves us a huge amount of development time," said John F. Payes, Vice President Marketing and Corporate Development, Dakis.

"Ultimately, this means we can offer our customers better value for their money. If we can write code once, and use it for a PDA or a Windows-based desktop, with minor changes, we can translate that time savings into cost savings for the customer."

Fast Development and Deployment
Building on Microsoft software, the Dakis team was able to not only meet, but to exceed deadlines in the solution's time to market.

"Every one of our developers worked on different technologies, like Java, and Linux, before joining Dakis" said Payes. "But after developing on .NET, I don't think any of us would want to go back."

For Brolisport, this short development and implementation cycle meant the solution was in place before a critical winter ski sales period.

Improved Customer Service
Since implementing the solution, the feedback from customers has been positive. Not only are they experiencing extraordinary customer service from staff that can pull up recommendations in seconds – they are also able to access this information on their own if staff are busy, or if they are just browsing.

"Since we implemented this solution, the response from customers has been positive," said Brochu. "Customers appreciate having all the information

they need, right at their fingertips. And as we expand to the Web, and continue to educate our customers about the system, I expect our customer satisfaction levels to keep improving."

Not only are customers reaping the benefits, the staff at Brolisport are happier, too. With the new solution in place, they can find answers to customer inquiries at their fingertips, helping them to sell more while offering better service. It also allows new staff members to confidently offer recommendations to customers, without having extensive training or product knowledge.

"Moving forward, we're continuing to work on ways to increase the functionality to the Dakis solution for Brolisport," said Payes, Dakis. "We're already adding barcode scanners to the staff PDAs, and we are starting work on a call centre option that will taking advantage of speech server technology."

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