



## Streamlining Interactions Among 1,000 Users With a Feature-Rich Corporate Intranet

### Overview

#### Country or Region

United States

#### Industry

Advertising

#### Customer Profile

Classified Ventures owns and operates numerous online classified advertising sites, including Apartments.com, Cars.com, and Homegain. The Chicago-based company is owned by five leading media companies, including: A.H. Belo Corporation, Gannett Co. Inc., Tribune Company, The McClatchy Company, and The Washington Post Company.

#### Business Situation

Classified Ventures executives wanted to make it easier for the company to distribute news and information to its employees, for employees to share information and to find the people and resources they needed within the growing organization.

#### Solution

Classified Ventures engaged Project Leadership Associates to build out a new corporate intranet using Microsoft Office SharePoint Server.

#### Benefits

- Rolled out intranet in 5 months
- Created a single information source for all users
- Improved access to customizable user profile information
- Reduced time to process purchasing requests
- Created a platform for ongoing development and improvements

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*Vicki Ledajaks, Director of Strategic Initiatives, Classified Ventures*

Chicago-based Classified Ventures, owner of such Web brands as Apartments.com, Cars.com, and HomeGain, had an intranet linking its 1,000+ employees that had not kept pace with the evolution of the organization itself. By mid 2008, most employees used it as little more than a corporate phone book, and even in that role its usefulness was waning. Classified Ventures executives wanted to revitalize the internal communications infrastructure, so they decided to build out a new intranet based on Microsoft Office SharePoint Server 2007. They engaged Project Leadership Associates (PLA) of Chicago to do the design, development and deployment, and within five months Classified Ventures had a new intranet that enables employees to find each other and interact with the company in ways that are easier, more rewarding, more efficient, and more gratifying. Along the way, Classified Ventures found an IT services partner with which it could work very well.

## Situation

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**Vicki Ledajaks, Director of Strategic Initiatives, Classified Ventures**

Classified Ventures is the parent company behind such well-known Internet brands as Apartments.com, Cars.com, and HomeGain. Formed in the late 1990s by a consortium of newspaper partners, Classified Ventures is currently owned by A.H. Belo Corporation, Gannett Co. Inc., Tribune Company, The McClatchy Company, and The Washington Post Company. Classified Ventures represents the logical evolution of the traditional classified advertisement. As the newspapers were looking toward the future, they saw the Web overtaking print media as the classified ad venue of choice.

But while Classified Ventures has been building its Internet presence and growing its brands—and creating a company with more than 1,000 employees working in multiple locations—the company’s internal communications infrastructure was not keeping pace. The company had attempted to facilitate internal communications by building an intranet in 2000 but by 2008, its employees were using it as little more than an internal phonebook.

Executives at Classified Ventures knew that the company needed a better solution for internal communications, including a vehicle to distribute company news and events to employees in multiple locations. They needed a solution that would make it easy for executives to communicate directly to employees, a place to promote employee and team achievements, and a location that would allow for multiple groups to manage and store information needed by employees on a daily basis. At the same time, they wanted a solution that would make it easy for employees to find out and take advantage of fun employee opportunities, like softball leagues and upcoming events. They knew they needed a solution that would make it easy for employees to find one another, but they also were looking for a personnel discovery system that would provide much richer search capabilities than their existing phone book provided. On top of all that, they wanted an internal communications infrastructure upon which they could introduce new services to facilitate the completion of common business processes.

“Given the way we had grown, improving internal communications was a major goal for us,” says Vicki Ledajaks, the Director of Strategic Initiatives at Classified Ventures. “Updating and improving our company-wide intranet would help us meet this goal.”

## Solution

Classified Ventures had already done a great deal of research into intranet technologies, and that experience prompted the corporate technology team to put Microsoft Office SharePoint Server on a short list of contenders. After selecting Office Sharepoint Server as the solution, Classified Ventures worked with Microsoft to develop a proof of concept and then contacted several Microsoft partners about providing development, deployment, and overall project management support for this new intranet. After a comprehensive evaluation, Classified Ventures selected Project Leadership Associates (PLA) as its intranet project partner.

“We’re a Web-based business,” notes Ledajaks, “and our users are pretty sophisticated. The fact that the people from PLA were savvy about both the technology and business was important. We could communicate clearly on both levels, so it was very clear that PLA would be a good fit.”

### **Building a New Foundation for Internal Communications**

PLA began developing the new intranet for Classified Ventures in September, 2008. One of the first things it did was to link Office SharePoint Server with the human resources system at Classified Ventures by way of Microsoft Active Directory, the directory service functionality in the Microsoft Windows Server 2008 operating system. With that link, Office SharePoint Server could then populate intranet user profiles with information pulled directly from the company’s human resources system. This would eliminate redundant user information and eliminate any chance of manual input error—and because Office SharePoint Server could update profile information regularly, any changes to employee information would be reflected in the intranet profiles very quickly.

PLA then configured Office SharePoint Server to use information about an employee’s role and organization affiliation to filter the content presented on the intranet Web pages. Each business unit sees a personalized view of the home page with their primary color and brand, as well as targeted news and announcements for their organization. PLA also configured Office SharePoint Server to filter information and functionality based on an employee’s role. Managers within an organization may see different items than non-managers, for example, and managers may have access to intranet tools that are not readily apparent to non-managers.

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Joe Giannetti, Vice President of Corporate Technology, Classified Ventures

### **Expanding the Intranet Search Functionality**

While both Classified Ventures and PLA could see the value of synchronizing the employee profile data in PeopleSoft and Office SharePoint Server, they could also see the limitations of that profile information. Group affiliations, phone numbers, office locations, and managers names were there, but there was nothing that really reflected an employee's personality. To address that situation, PLA extended the functionality inherent in Office SharePoint Server to enable individuals to add more information to their user profiles and to edit and easily update those attributes that were not imported from the HR (Human Resources) database. With this customization, PLA made it possible for employees to enhance their profiles by make notes about their interests, talk about past jobs they've done, and more.

PLA then replaced the native people search functionality within Office SharePoint Server with a custom-built search tool that would become the basis for the new Classified Ventures phone book application. Using this new profile search tool, employees would be able to search for other employees using all the information imported from their HR system, including by department or location. Additionally, Classified Ventures worked with PLA to add organizational hierarchy information to each employee's profile. This allows employees to see an employee's management all the way up to the CEO. Additionally, PLA refined the native content search tools within Office SharePoint Server so that employees could more quickly and easily find other resources and content within the company. It added translation tables, for example, that incorporated the company's internal acronyms and synonyms. With this addition, a search on the term "TOCC" would not only return pointers to content with that four letter acronym, but also to content with the phrase "Help Desk," which is what the acronym TOCC refers to internally.

### **Creating an Applications Platform for the Internal Business Processes**

To make this new intranet even more valuable to users on a day-to-day basis, Classified Ventures executives wanted it to act as a platform upon which to run applications that would streamline standard business processes. In the long run, many applications would be available, but Classified Ventures and PLA started with a single application designed to automate the process of routing expense requests for approval.

PLA developed and deployed a set of Microsoft Office InfoPath 2007 forms that could be called up from the intranet and used to capture the information that purchasing needed. These forms provided powerful checking and validation tools that made sure that the information in the form conformed to expectations and contained no obvious errors or discrepancies. When users click the Submit button in an InfoPath form, the workflow tools in Office SharePoint Server routes the form to the appropriate managers and groups for approval. PLA also set up a tracking feature so that the person submitting the request can, at any time, see its status. That status page shows exactly where the request is, who has yet to approve it, and more.

## **Benefits**

PLA project management, development, and Office SharePoint Server deployment skills have helped Classified Ventures roll out an intranet that is having a dramatic impact on internal communications within this rapidly evolving enterprise.

### **Increasing Ease of Discovery**

“The old intranet used to be a glorified phone book,” says Ledajaks, “but you had to know someone's name to get their phone number. Now, you don't even have to know that. You can search by location, by department, by keywords. That makes it easy for someone in one group to find the right person in another group. You can see their picture, get a bit of information about them.”

The ease with which users can get to know something about their coworkers has had a marked effect throughout the organization, and Ledajaks is quick to point out the immediate benefits right within the Corporate Tech group.

“The customers of the Corporate Tech group are other employees and groups,” says Ledajaks, “and our desktop support people, for example, are always getting blind calls from other people in the corporation. They used to have no idea who they were talking to—but now they can quickly pull up a person's profile while they're on the phone.”

As soon as they get just a little more information about who they're talking to, you can hear the tone of voice change. They have a better sense of who they're talking to, and it makes a real difference."

"We told everyone in advance that the new phone book was going to be a killer intranet application," Ledajaks goes on to say, "so it was important for us to nail that one. Working with PLA, we did."

#### **Reducing Time to Approval**

In addition to the new phone book application, the streamlined, intranet-based approval process that PLA built has resulted in greater efficiencies at Classified Ventures.

"That process had been an email and paper-based process before," says Ledajaks, "and there was no transparency. Once they submitted a request, the business people had no idea where that request might be in the approval process at any moment. They had no idea what was happening or why it was taking so long to generate a purchase order. Now, the business users can see where it's stuck and they can go light a fire under that person to get the approvals moving."

The new intranet application has benefits for management, too. "The managers who need to approve these requests can now do that using email, even from their BlackBerries," notes Joe Giannetti, Vice President of Corporate Technology at Classified Ventures. "That enables them to be much more responsive than when they had to sign a stack of physical documents by hand. We used to print out a stack of paper that could be an inch thick, and then we'd bind those forms together and send them around for signatures. It would go from person to person to person in sequence. With the new intranet application, once a request is ready for approval, it's queued up and automatically sent to the right people for approval—in parallel. Most of the requests we submit from Corporate Tech are now approved in just a couple of hours, rather than the three to five days it used to take."

#### **Working Together Effectively**

"At Classified Ventures, we work with a sense of urgency and speed," says Ledajaks. "We tend to be very well prepared, so we don't have to cut corners during a project. What we needed to accomplish our goals in the time we had was a competent partner that was willing to work with us in our style—and it was very clear from the start that PLA would be a good fit in this regard."

Indeed, by the time Classified Ventures had finished working with Microsoft on the proof of concept and chosen PLA to provide project support, little more than three months remained for PLA to do the work before the December debut. Because of its extensive experience with large-scale projects involving Office SharePoint Server, though, PLA knew what pieces would be involved in this project and knew how to manage the people and processes to accomplish the result that Classified Ventures desired. The result? The new Classified Ventures intranet was ready for launch 10 days early.

"I did not feel like I was really working with consultants when I worked with the people at PLA," Ledajaks says. "It was as if they were as invested as we were in the success of the project. They were very dedicated, and I very much appreciated the fact that the people doing the technical work were business savvy people. That really helped us work through things quickly because we could communicate very clearly. That mix of business and technical expertise made this whole project go very smoothly."

#### **About Project Leadership Associates**

Based in Chicago, Project Leadership Associates (PLA) is a business and technology consulting firm that empowers organizations with services across four core solution groups:

- Strategy and execution
- Business operations
- Applications
- Infrastructure

A Microsoft Gold Certified Partner, with competencies in networking infrastructure, custom development, unified communications, business intelligence solutions, information worker and licensing solutions, PLA has seasoned senior consultants who understand how to bring technology to bear on real business challenges.

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#### **Backend Materials**

Software and Services:

- Microsoft Server Product Portfolio
  - Microsoft Office SharePoint Server 2007
  - Microsoft Windows Server 2008
- Microsoft Forefront™ Client Security

Hardware

- IBM X-series servers