



Bond and Bond: Integrating Multiple Channels Seamlessly

Brick and mortar retailer uses Elastic Path ecommerce to enhance customer choice and add cross-channel operational efficiencies



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DARREN HARPER,
IT DEVELOPMENT MANAGER.
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Summary

Bond + Bond brought 100+ years of retail experience online with an ecommerce store designed to complement and enhance existing in-store, call center and catalog channels. Using Elastic Path ecommerce, the New Zealand-based retailer quickly integrated with existing business systems allowing customer service representatives increased visibility into orders resulting in increased accuracy and efficiency. With the primary objective of maximizing customer choice and convenience in mind, B+B customers may now order goods online with the same consistent, seamless customer experience found via other channels.

Company

Beginning in 1875 as gum buyers in Silverdale, New Zealand's Bond + Bond rapidly evolved into a general store and by 1894, moved to Auckland to open a flagship appliance store. Through consolidation and expansion, they've grown to 33 stores in addition to their noted catalog channel. In September 2006 they brought their selection of 4000 products online offering optional pickup from any store in the country - no matter how rural. Bond + Bond is operated under parent company Noel Leeming Group Limited and wholly owned by Gresham Private Equity.

Situation

“The long term holistic view of retail suggests that customers will choose their natural channel at the time of purchase and may change at will using a hybrid or mixture of channels. The point is, it's the customers choice,” Linda Geary, Business Development Manager.

Objectives

- Create an ecommerce environment which blends seamlessly with in-store, call center and mail order catalog systems and processes
- Provide another channel to interact with customers for product research as well as service returns regardless of purchase channel
- Offer in-store pickup from any location in addition to home delivery options, while also managing local in-store inventories effectively
- Maintain the ability to quickly adapt merchandising tactics and customizations in-house with minimal hassles or roadblocks

Solution

Accommodating this customer-driven focus required a platform which was flexible and customizable. Darrin Harper, Bond + Bond's IT Development Manager notes, the primary reason for choosing EP saying, “We found EP to have the structural integrity to handle our goals of delivering a simple and effective shopping channel for our customers while keeping site development and management in-house.”

Results

Within three months of choosing Elastic Path, Bond + Bond launched a fully transactional store with a comprehensive catalog. Six months after the launch, the customer response has been fantastic as a research tool as well as a sales channel.

Linda Geary points out, “The Bond + Bond website operates as a fully integrated ‘clicks and mortar’ model, meaning that we have considerable advantage over pure online retailers as we already have an established brand, customer base and distribution network that comes from operating physical stores.”



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Story

Fresh Start

Bond + Bond's trek to a fully integrated 'clicks and mortar' environment did not begin with Elastic Path, rather they spent two months working to migrate their existing IBM WebSphere eCommerce platform from version 5.4 to 5.6. Linda Geary, Business Development Manager, explains their frustrations, "There had always been questions around the suitability of WC for our business; this was the final straw. The Web-Sphere eCommerce platform was too heavy on maintenance and cost and was inflexible to our needs."

After deciding the status quo was no longer acceptable, the Bond + Bond team considered and rejected options such as a hosted ecommerce site, an externally-hosted add-on shopping cart module, or switching to a "heavyweight" replacement. B+B instead decided on a more nimble replacement and examined a variety of options including Avetti.

After comprehensive research, both B+B's internal IT team and an external consultant recommended Elastic Path as the best choice to meet their prime objective of integrating with existing systems with maximum accuracy and minimal process disruption.

"The key for us was, and always has been, the integration of the two systems, that the right data is showing online, that our catalog works with the database structure and the customer information comes back into our systems properly and stays up to date," explains Linda Geary.

Putting it Together

Once the decision was made, the Elastic Path 4.1 ecommerce website - running with IBM's Websphere Application Server Express 6.0 and SQL Server 2000 on Windows Server 2003 - was integrated and deployed in less than 3 months.

Darrin Harper, IT Development Manager explains the architecture, "We Integrated Elastic Path with Prism, our home-grown inventory and order management application, using XML over WebSphere MQ. The product catalogue (including images), offers and physical store details are sent to EP nightly. Similarly, orders are sent via MQ from EP to Prism in order to tie in to the Prism delivery component."

The deployment project was human resource efficient using 2.5 Java developers for the term along with .25 of a Report Program Generator (RPG) programmer to connect with the existing technology assets running B+B's core inventory and order system.

Joys of Integration

With the integration, all orders - whether originating in-store or via web or catalog - are fed into the same data structure for consistency and accuracy. This catch-all allows customer service representatives to ably assist with any order, at any time, regardless of the transaction channel.

Linda notes the operational importance of seamless order processing saying, "The key is that it needs to work within the normal existing systems and the normal day to day operations that the store managers and employees go through whether it be a online order, a phone order or in store purchase without having to switch applications."

This operational concept provides customers the freedom to conduct initial research online while purchasing later, either in-store or by phone, with no difference in price or promotions. Further, any problems with products or orders are handled with equal efficiency regardless of purchase channel. Plus all off-line promotions (TV, catalogs, radio, newspapers) are applicable online, further fostering confidence for shoppers who hop between channels.

Looking Ahead

Six months in, Bond + Bond's store running on Elastic Path 4.1 is getting a positive reaction from customers and B+B's staff alike - many of whom are researching online before finally purchasing in-store or via telephone. Linda points out, "They couldn't wait. They are saying thank goodness. The people have been screaming out to be able to research and compare our major brands online. Now we are looking closer to find out what works for them, what they'd like next."

Moving forward, parent company Noel Leeming Group plan to launch another store using Elastic Path version 5.1. Additionally, B+B are considering adding live web chat to their customer service options to augment the call center and self-evolving Q&A knowledge base.

As New Zealand households continue to adopt broadband connections and become more familiar with online shopping, the future looks bright for Bond + Bond's well-integrated customers and operators alike.

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