

Ahlers helps retailers respond to trends with real-time IBM extranet.

Overview

■ Challenge

Menswear manufacturer wanted to improve productivity and meet the demands of its retail partners for faster, more efficient business processes

■ Why On Demand?

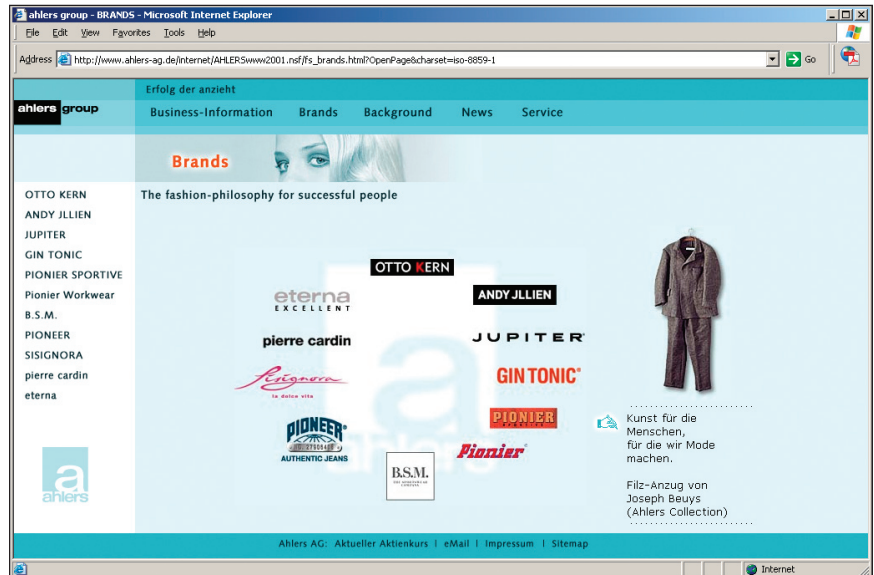
Ahlers needed to streamline its key processes and provide retailers with access to the real-time information and transactions they required for maximum productivity

■ Solution

Ahlers24.com, a Web self-service site, enables retailers to receive product information and place and track orders in real time across all of Ahlers's brands

■ Key Benefits

Simple, easy-to-use tool to execute and follow up on transactions; faster, automated systems saving time and money; improved customer service



Men's clothing manufacturer Ahlers developed an elegant vehicle for promoting all of its brands at once—a business-to-business (B2B) Web site powered by IBM and IBM Business Partner Perform GmbH.

By responding to consumers' demands for the most current styles, Germany-based Ahlers Group (Ahlers) turns international trends into wearable fashion—and helps ensure that shops and boutiques throughout Europe are in stock and in business year-round.

However, keeping profits buoyant for the 5,800-employee Ahlers (www.ahlers-ag.com, www.ahlers24.com) means responding to the needs of the company's retail store base as well. For these stores, Ahlers maintains a sales force of approximately 500 individuals who routinely conduct visits to take orders for fashion lines, as well as for back-ordered items.

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*—Uwe Dubbert, IT Manager,
Ahlers Group*

Anticipating and responding to customer and market demands in real time

On Demand Benefits

- Ability of retailers to restock fast-selling items quickly due to easily accessible information
- Significant time savings for retailers because comprehensive multi-brand site takes the place of visits by several sales people, each representing one brand
- Easy-to-use order and order confirmation tools are faster and more cost-effective than phone calls, faxes and e-mails, saving time and money for retailers
- More up-to-date product information for sales representatives, replacing bulky paper catalogs
- Opportunity for Ahlers to increase market share by enabling retailers to carry more Ahlers brands
- Scalable, robust B2B solution leveraging existing IBM iSeries™ technology infrastructure reduces costs and speeds time to market
- Open standards-based solution able to integrate with other vendors' technologies, Ahlers's existing enterprise resource planning (ERP) system and EDIFACT electronic data interchange (EDI) interface

With a world-famous name like Pierre Cardin and other well-known European brands such as eterna and Otto Kern, Ahlers had hoped retailers would carry several of its brands and keep sales moving briskly. But retailers typically carried only one or two brands, simply because they had no fast, convenient way to learn about the others. It was an improvable business model in an industry noted for its whipsaw changes and fierce competition.

As the power of the Internet became apparent, the Ahlers retailers wanted to take advantage of its potential to improve productivity. In addition, they wanted better access to account information and inventory and shipping data. They also wanted to minimize paperwork and offer online ordering capabilities for wardrobe staples such as jeans. "To obtain the data they needed, retailers had to rely on e-mails, faxes and telephone calls, but those channels were slow and inefficient," says Uwe Dubbert, Ahlers's IT manager. "It was clear that our traditional methods were outdated. We needed to change our business processes to be more responsive to our retail partners in order to keep them satisfied—and to ensure their continued loyalty. Many of our retail customers had experienced the efficiency of e-business and wanted to do business using automated methods."

To become a truly dynamic force within its industry, Ahlers needed an easy-to-use catalog of all its brands combined with a paper-saving interactive business system that would save time for retailers. With its wide selection of styles ranging from casual to classic, Ahlers knew it could become a market leader and increase its revenues, given the opportunity to respond properly to the information needs of its key business partners. The answer to its dilemma lay in creating a comprehensive system that would bring together and streamline the key business processes for retailers—and give them access to the real-time information and transactions they needed for maximum productivity.

Providing a new level of customer service

To meet its various needs, Ahlers created a B2B Web site that responds dynamically to the information demands of its sales force and retail partners. Access to 24x7 self-service enables retailers to restock their shelves quickly and step up the pace of other routine business processes. Furthermore, with inventory verification, the retailers can avoid placing orders for out-of-stock items and receive alternative items that may be acceptable. That saves time for retailers and helps Ahlers respond flexibly to the needs of a changing market.

Ahlers also leverages the automated solution to promote cross-brand familiarity within its retail base. The company is now working to increase its overall market share by placing more brands into existing stores.

Service that suits the retailer

Under the Ahlers umbrella, 11 menswear companies are represented and retailers can easily do business with any of them through a single user ID and password. In addition to information about product lines, the Web site also informs visitors about Ahlers's trade fair appearances and advertising.

Both retailers and Ahlers sales staff have access to the e-commerce Web site; the sales staff uses laptop computers to gain browser-based access in the presence of the retailers, which allows for more productive sales calls. The site also delivers shipping information through shared applications provided over the Internet by Deutsche Post World Net (DHL), Deutscher Paket Dienst (DPD) United Parcel Service (UPS) and others, enabling the exchange of formal business documents, such as invoices and purchase orders, by e-mail in PDF format, or EDI.

Leveraging existing investments

When the company decided to respond to its business stakeholders in real time with a single, integrated solution, it knew that the solution would have to take advantage of the company's existing automation in its manufacturing, logistics and accounting divisions. Therefore, the solution would have to work together with Ahlers's PERDRESS application—an apparel industry ERP system offered by IBM Business Partner Perform GmbH.

Having decided on a new B2B Web site, Ahlers sought a cost-effective infrastructure solution that would leverage its existing skill base on the IBM @server iSeries. As it turned out, Ahlers's iSeries 830 system with its IBM OS/400, Version 5, Release 2 operating environment provided most of the software components the company would need—including IBM Lotus Domino application server and IBM DB2 Universal Database—to completely transform its methods for doing business.

Key Components

Software

- IBM DB2® Universal Database™
- IBM OS/400®, Version 5, Release 2
- IBM Lotus® Notes®
- IBM Lotus Domino™
- IBM Lotus Domino Web Access

Servers

- IBM @server iSeries 830

Business Partner

- Perform GmbH
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“We believed that the path to a successful solution lay with proven IBM relationships and components—and we were right.”

—Uwe Dubbert

The new ahlers24.com solution was developed, implemented and tested in just five months with the technical assistance of Perform and the Lotus software sales team from IBM. "For ahlers24.com, we turned to our rock-solid, versatile iSeries, robust IBM software brands and outstanding IBM Business Partner Perform," says Dubbert. "We believed that the path to a successful solution lay with proven IBM relationships and components—and we were right."

Fast, seamless transactions with back-end systems

For some of its previous Web-based applications, Ahlers used EDIFACT, an open standards-based EDI interface that was already mapped to PERDRESS. Ahlers decided to extend this interface for its new B2B application to enable retailers to access PERDRESS through their own ERP systems.

This capability enables retailers to automate their business processes by using their own purchase order systems. Accessing their ERP systems, retailers transmit orders to Ahlers and receipt is automatically confirmed. This and other automated transactions save time for both retailers and Ahlers, while expediting the process of exchanging business-critical information.

To communicate with the user, Domino aggregates product information from IBM Lotus Notes databases, and real-time data—such as prices and inventories—from DB2 Universal Database. The Domino servlet engine delivers static or dynamic HTML to the user's browser, which is equipped with IBM Lotus Domino Web Access.

"The beauty of this solution lies in the flexibility of hardware and software components that were designed for iSeries," says Dubbert. The iSeries running the ahlers24.com Web site is one of two iSeries systems in a central data center that manages the company's operations in eight European countries.

Prepared for new ideas

The ahlers24.com extranet has been met with enthusiasm from the retailer community, which appreciates its real-time responsiveness. There are already plans for enhancements. The company envisions more detailed product displays—including 3D visualizations—as well as a client document archive for order confirmations, shipping bills and invoices. "Perform and the Lotus team have served us so well that we intend to call upon them again," says Dubbert. "And we've transformed the way our retailers do business with us, while ultimately getting our apparel brands to market faster and more efficiently."

For more information

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