Mycogen Seeds Revitalizes Website to Grow Stronger Customer Connections

Mycogen
SEEDS

Summary

Mycogen Seeds, an affiliate of Dow AgroSciences, needed to improve its website to foster stronger customer connections and drive sales. The company also wanted to invigorate its brand to more easily attract and engage customers. Mycogen chose Microsoft SharePoint Server 2010 for Internet Sites as the foundation for a new website that provides growers with product research, analysis, and contact information that is customized to a grower's geographic location. Mycogen deployed the site in less than four months, in time for the 2011 seed purchasing season. Content owners update the site easily, keeping information fresh and relevant. With access to self-service tools, growers can directly access information in Mycogen product databases. In the first month after the site was launched, Mycogen saw vast increases in site traffic, page views, and visitor retention.

For 30 years, Mycogen Seeds has produced, marketed, and sold hybrid corn, sunflower, soybean, sorghum, alfalfa, and canola seeds to growers across the United States. As retail seed company of Dow AgroSciences, a top-tier provider of agrochemical and biotechnology solutions, Mycogen gives growers access to the latest seed hybrid, variety, and trait advancements. Mycogen is based in Indianapolis, Indiana.

The Mycogen Seeds website existed as a subdivision of the Dow AgroSciences umbrella site; displayed Dow branding, colors, and design; and used a Dow web address. The site was built on the parent company's content management system (CMS) from Interwoven. Mycogen couldn't customize the look and feel of its site and couldn't promote a powerful brand image to its customers. Donna Queisser, Digital Producer at Bader Rutter, the agency of record for Dow AgroSciences explains, "Customers were never sure if they had reached the Mycogen site. We needed to create a separate website, and improve the experience to accelerate adoption of the brand." Bader Rutter oversees the Mycogen web presence.

Growers visited the Mycogen site to research the traits and characteristics of seeds for their specific region, in order to achieve the highest crop yields. "Growers want to be able to quickly find the information that is relevant to their region," says Queisser. "They want to see the characteristics of the seed, and determine which seed has had the most success. If they find that a particular product has performed as well as or better than a competitor's product, they may move toward a purchase." The purpose of the Mycogen site is purely informational; growers cannot purchase seed from the site. It is essential that the site expedite connection to a sales representative who can help the grower make a purchase. However, Queisser explains, because the information on the old site was "largely static, and the navigation unintuitive," many growers left the site before taking the critical next step of contacting Mycogen.

Bader Rutter conducted extensive usability testing and competitive analysis, and used the results of its research to design a new and improved Mycogen website. "The audience insights we gathered from these studies helped us define the optimal content, functionality, and experience that growers want from a seed company website," says Queisser. Bader Rutter prioritized three business objectives:

‣ Products: Make it easy for growers to discover Mycogen products.

‣ Performance: Make it easy for growers to determine how Mycogen products are performing.

‣ People: Make it easy for a grower to contact a sales representative, agronomist, or nutritionist for more information.

Says Queisser, "Those were the three crucial things that were either hard for growers to find, or that we were not offering at all on the old website."

From a maintenance perspective, the CMS on which the Mycogen site was built was difficult to update. Users had to import data from Mycogen databases into a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet, and then copy and paste data from the spreadsheet into templates in the CMS. Mycogen wanted to streamline this process. "We were managing data as content, which added an unnecessary step to the process. We needed to tie the site directly to the existing Mycogen databases."

Mycogen was also driven by a fast deadline. In early 2010, the company prioritized the website overhaul project. And it wanted to have the site built and deployed in time for the upcoming sales season, which would begin early in the fourth quarter of the year. "This meant launching the site no later than September, to be online for the prime time when growers are doing research for their seed purchase decisions for the coming year," says Queisser.

Solution

Mycogen shared its plan for a new website, including 300 wireframes, with nine different development firms. These firms presented 11 different solutions for building and maintaining Internet sites—from smaller, custom-developed CMS-based solutions to industry-standard enterprise systems. One of the companies Mycogen met with was Concurrency, a Microsoft Gold Certified Partner based in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Concurrency proposed using Microsoft SharePoint Server 2010 to build the Mycogen website. "Immediately, Concurrency instilled great confidence in us that they could help us successfully complete this project using SharePoint Server 2010," says Queisser. "One thing that really won us over was their plan to connect SharePoint Server 2010 directly to Mycogen databases. We wanted a dynamic, data-driven site."

Concurrency took advantage of many out-of-the-box SharePoint Server 2010 features to rapidly create a Mycogen website. These features included the claims-based security model for validation of authorized users, built-in enterprise search capabilities, and integrated web content management features. For instance, to promote the Mycogen brand, Concurrency created custom SharePoint Server 2010 master pages, page layouts, and cascading style sheets to create a template that includes the Mycogen site design and style guidelines (such as logo and color scheme). With this template, any content owner can automatically modify pages or create new pages for the site.

The firm also used Microsoft ASP.NET 2.0, part of the Microsoft .NET Framework, to configure SharePoint Web Parts that can automatically extract seed hybrid information from where it is stored in SharePoint Server 2010 libraries and Microsoft SQL Server 2008 databases. The Mycogen "Product Finder," displayed on the home page of the site, is powered by a SharePoint Web Part, and is used by growers to conduct customized product searches. Using the Product Finder, growers can filter seed research according to their specific growing region. Mark Rentmeester, Senior Application Developer at Concurrency and Team Lead for the Mycogen Seeds project says, "With SharePoint Server 2010, the combination of ready-made, out-of-the-box features, and straightforward customization using ASP.NET gives us complete control over the environment." Concurrency used the Microsoft Visual Studio 2010 development system and Microsoft SharePoint Designer 2010 to customize the environment.

The site uses a grower's zip code, which can be entered in a text box in the Product Finder, to identify the grower's geographic region, display the names and phone numbers of local Mycogen seed representatives, present a local map with pin markers indicating where plots with a particular seed have been grown, and gather the identification numbers of the seed hybrids that are appropriate to that region. Using drop-down menus and check boxes, the grower can customize the search and filter results by crop type, time-to-maturity, traits, and yield (see Figure 1).

The grower can also click on a particular hybrid to read an overview of the seed, to access performance data from the previous year in that region, and to see how the seed has performed against the competition (see Figure 2). To help a grower quickly analyze performance, yield advantage is indicated using easy-to-recognize green, yellow, and red symbols.

Mycogen content owners can add or edit site pages—including modifying product marketing information and adding images and logos from SharePoint document libraries—using a web-based text editor that includes the familiar Ribbon feature, part of the Microsoft Office Fluent interface. A standardized navigation system and design is built into the site templates, which are accessible through the editing tool, so that changes can be made in real-time and without the help from the IT department. The site was launched in September 2010, just as the 2011 seed purchasing time started. Mycogen is currently working on adding user feedback tools to the site to foster a connected, online community of customers. Soon, customers will be able to apply ratings to (from one to four stars) and comment on their experience with Mycogen products. The company also plans to add links to the site to connect with third-party social media environments and forums such as Twitter and YouTube. "These enhancements will help customers benefit from other customers' firsthand experiences with our products," says Queisser.

Mycogen used SharePoint Server 2010 to create a new website that strengthens its brand identity, provides growers with easy-to-find and easy-to-understand product information, and quickly connects growers with Mycogen sales representatives. The solution allows the company's content owners to update content on their own. Development of the site took less than four months, meeting the goal of having the site ready for the 2011 seed purchasing season.

With the former site, which relied on a CMS system from Interwoven, Mycogen users had to copy and paste seed data, after extracting it from databases, into the website. With SharePoint Server 2010, Mycogen connects the site directly to those databases, eliminating this unnecessary step. "We truly have a data-driven website now," says Queisser. "SharePoint Server 2010 lets us plug directly into Mycogen data rather than manage data as content."

Editing tools also simplify daily management of the site. "The Ribbon makes it really easy for the business to update web pages. It's intuitive, it makes sense, and users don't have to ask IT for help," says Queisser.

Concurrency started development on the site in June 2010 and launched the site four months later. "For us," says Rentmeester, "the value of SharePoint Server 2010 is its combination of built-in features that we can use to create a website quickly, and the development environment through which we can then add customized components."

Rentmeester estimates that if his team had had to develop certain components, such as security, user authentication, and a web content management system from scratch, it would have "greatly added another month of development time, if not more," to the Mycogen project.

Concurrency used SharePoint Server 2010 to build templates for the Mycogen site, which include the Mycogen logo and color scheme. "We were able to easily incorporate the branding and design that Bader Rutter provided," says Rentmeester. "Through a combination of master pages and the ability to deploy custom cascading style sheets, SharePoint Server 2010 allows us to easily apply a customized look and feel so our customers can achieve their marketing objectives."