

Sapphire Case Study: Improveline



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Javier Brage, Improveline

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If you're undertaking any building or decorating work at home and have used the Internet in your quest for a reputable contractor, the chances are you will already have come across improveline.com, Europe's leading home improvement web site. The site was unveiled in October 1999 and in the short time since its launch has rocketed to number 28 in the top 100 privately owned European web-sites (Sunday Times' e-league (published 2nd July 2000).

Improveline.com, based in London, matches homeowners completing home improvement projects with approved, recommended contractors. The service is free of charge, contacting 80 suitable contractors from a screened database. The first three to respond to the request are then directed to the homeowner to provide a quotation.

The screening process is stringent. Improveline.com screens professionals using various criteria including; credit history, legal history, number of years in business, and verified customer recommendations. Improveline.com also underwrite the work undertaken, guaranteeing it for five years if the contractor ceases trading.

The incredible growth of the organisation, and forecast future expansion required second-phase funding by July 2000. The time had come to search for a more suitable accounting solution that would cope with the new challenges that growth represents.

Javier Brage, Financial Controller of Improveline.com recalls, "We required a stronger, creditable accounting package that would meet all our new system requirements and could be implemented rapidly, before we undertook the second wave of funding. A financial solution was required that investors could trust and would be flexible enough to grow with the operation."

He continues "The search started at Softworld for Accounting and Finance 2000 in March. I was particularly interested in Sage through my experience of Sage Line 100 with Improveline, and SunSystems on recommendation from a colleague who had successfully used the system in the past. I visited numerous exhibition stands, one of which was Sapphire. I was particularly impressed by their knowledge and expertise in implementing SunSystems into dot.com operations, and was eager to talk further with them about our specific requirements."

Improveline.com is representative of virtually all Sapphire's dot.com implementations, with similar product requirements in every case. SunSystems is proving to be a perfect match for such an organisation due to its highly scalable and flexible nature.

Brage comments, "A key consideration was the growth rate of Improveline.com. Between January and July 2000 the site visitor total was up a staggering 1123%. By July 2000 over 1/2 million unique visitors had logged onto the site with job requests whose value exceeded £65 million. This growth rate was reflected in the workforce, which had doubled from 25 to 50 employees. The chosen accounting system was to be installed in the middle of this tremendous growth, and was required to offer the



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scalability to expand with the company. SunSystems flexible accounting and reporting structure would allow us to implement the system on a small scale and then add account codes and structure"

He continues, "The system needed to handle more than just rapid UK growth. The opportunity for any successful dot.com is to roll out the operation overseas. We needed a system that wouldn't roll over in Europe. With SunSystems renowned Multi-currency and multilingual capabilities, we have the opportunity to expand into Europe when the time is right."

SunSystems multi-national capabilities are widely regarded as the best in the middle-market. Unlike other accounting systems, a single installation of the software is compatible with every country in the world and available in 27 languages.

Brage recalls, "Perhaps our biggest consideration was the chosen product's ability to automate as many of the back office systems as possible. This meant linking the software to our current operations system which was designed 'in-house' to suit very specific procedures. The system is run on an SQL database, automating the workflow of receiving an information request from the end-user, faxing the tender out to 80 contractors, and forwarding the first three responses back to the end-user. The accounting system of choice needed to link with this to automate the billing of contractors. Sapphire were able to demonstrate SunSystems capabilities linking the two systems seamlessly. This also gave me the opportunity to automate other processes within the company"

The decision was to be made very quickly, in time for the second-phase funding. Improveline.com's requirement was to run the system 'live' from the May month-end. It was essential that the solution had the credentials to assure investors that the future would be secure. Improveline.com's investors include Kingfisher, Europe's leading DIY retail owning brands including B&Q, Comet & Woolworths. SunSystems has well-established reputation, and is installed in over 20,000 sites in 187 countries.

Improveline.com chose Sapphire to implement SunSystems at the beginning of May. The solution included Ledger Accounting, Multi-currency and Sales Order Processing modules. The system would utilise Improveline.com's SQL database with a Windows NT operating system. Sapphire were able to install and test the software, and have the system running online within two weeks, meeting Improveline.com's strict deadlines, and permitting the organisation to run the May month-end on the new accounting system.

Brage says, "Sapphire have provided us with the key elements to ensure a rapid solution. We are happy to be continuing working together in order to ensure that we get the most from the accounting suite over the long term. We have also purchased the Vision reporting suite, which we plan to use to provide reports in a Microsoft Excel format to various heads of departments. After a rapid implementation it is vital that we have the support available to enhance and fully utilise SunSystem's many features."

He concludes, "Sapphire's offering is greater than just the right software. Their presence in this marketplace is reassuring. Through their work with major organisations such as PricewaterhouseCoopers in running the SunSystems dot.com User Group, I am not only able to ensure I am well informed about developments in SunSystems software, but also the dot.com industry as a whole."