

Blue North Strategies Inc.

Bringing a Data-Driven Design Approach to the Marketing World

Brent Klassen and Cam Shapansky started working together in 1994 at a firm Shapansky founded called Information DesignWorks, which was dedicated to “bringing the discipline of information design and personalization to high-volume transactional communications.” That firm was eventually sold, and a few years later Klassen and Shapansky followed different career paths. In 2002, the pair reunited to become partners in a new venture, Blue North Strategies Inc. based in Guelph, Ontario.

While Blue North Strategies offers marketing communications and management consulting, what sets the company apart is its concept of White Page Marketing™. This refers to the company’s ability to create data-driven, highly personalized, finely targeted and aesthetically appealing communications to inspire the active interest of each individual recipient. Turning this concept into an efficient and cost-effective reality was a core commitment for the young company. In 2003, when The Co-Operators Insurance Company asked Blue North to transform a static quarterly newsletter into a dynamic marketing tool, Klassen and Shapansky recognized that in order to execute on their vision for creating higher value communications they would need to invest in a broader range of technology capabilities.

FINDING THE RIGHT PLATFORM

“The Co-Operators understood there was a lot more value they could get out of their quarterly newsletter for customers than what they were getting—if they had a more personalized strategy,” said Brent Klassen. “They hired us to figure out how to do this. Our goal was to transform the newsletter from a completely static piece into a highly personalized dynamic communication that was relevant to each recipient. We knew from the outset that in order to fully implement our vision we would need a very robust software solution.”

Blue North made a list of its software requirements, which included an intuitive and collaborative design environment; a comprehensive set of capabilities that would allow it to produce variable color documents of all types; and the capability to generate VIPP output to meet the needs of The Co-Operators’ print supplier. With list in hand, they went to the Xplor conference in 2003 in search of the right solution.

“We worked the exhibition floor and quickly eliminated a number of vendors based on their inability to meet our needs,” recalls Klassen. “There was infrastructure already in place on the print side, so the ability to produce VIPP output simultaneously with PDF was non-negotiable. Extream Software’s Dialogue was the only solution that could meet all of our requirements. Another reason we chose Dialogue is the fact that it was clearly the up-and-coming leader for personalized document creation—Dialogue was considered ‘hot property’ by everyone we talked to, and that’s exactly what we wanted to differentiate Blue North.”



Personalization has increased response rates to as high as 14 percent.

THE NEWSLETTER COMES TO LIFE

Dialogue's point-and-click design environment makes it possible for Blue North's creative staff to design and immediately review fully composed output—including variable text and graphics—online or printed. The company is also taking full advantage of Dialogue's ability to reuse design objects across multiple applications, significantly reducing development time for the complex, personalized monthly newsletter. Dialogue ensures the personalized newsletter is graphically consistent from issue to issue, regardless of content changes or delivery channel—whether printed and mailed or deployed on the web.

The Co-Operators newsletter is now produced on a staggered schedule, allowing the company to coordinate its mailings with policy renewals and to budget costs monthly. One section of the newsletter is reserved for cross-selling and up-selling insurance products, resulting in response rates as high as 14 percent.

A SOLUTION FOR ALL CLIENTS

"Dialogue's robust capabilities allow us to offer clients personalized, data-driven communications that give them—and us—a competitive advantage," said Klassen. "We can design and create personalized marketing pieces while integrating all the various components of our client's communications strategy with consistent content, regardless of output format or delivery medium—from brochures, direct mail and newsletters to transactional documents."

Another Dialogue application developed by Blue North is the "Developing Hope" newsletter that it produces quarterly for World Vision, a charitable organization that encourages donors to sponsor communities in the developing world. Blue North creates anywhere from 5,000 to 15,000 communication appeals for World Vision every month, and each one is built from personalized donor information and progress reports relevant to the donor's particular projects.



"Dialogue's re-usability capabilities are key for both the Co-Operators newsletter and the Developing Hope application," Klassen noted. "Because we use the same basic design components so often, reducing the amount of work we have to do to create and personalize every new application is important. Another benefit is the directness with which Dialogue maps data to the design layout. There are a lot of solutions you can use for data mapping, but in many cases the actual construction of the final piece is a different process, and it can be awkward and cumbersome. A third advantage is Dialogue's ability to manage content. For example, we produce the Co-Operators newsletter every month. The content changes sometimes every two months, sometimes every six months, and all we have to do is drop the new content in to the right spot on our server and the new content is retrieved on demand. We don't have to do any redesign or re-programming."

DIALOGUE IS A COMPETITIVE DIFFERENTIATOR

Dialogue supports Blue North's long-term goals by enabling its unique selling point—White Page Marketing. "When implementing White Page Marketing for our clients, we don't start with design and we don't start with content," Klassen stated. "We ask, 'what do we know about each customer?' and 'what do we know about the business objectives of this piece?' Then, 'how can we draw linkages between them?' Only then do we begin to design and write content. Everything flows from the data and Dialogue is the platform where we launch the communication process. In the coming decade, I believe we're going to see the paradigm for a marketing communications shift—from being design-driven to being data-driven. With Dialogue, we are already there—creating data-driven marketing communications that carry real impact."



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