

SOLUTIONS FOR SMALL BUSINESS

Case Study

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Comcast Business Class Delivers Cloud-based Technology that Helps Promotional Outfitters Compete with Much Larger Firms

*Case studies from **Solutions for Small Business** are designed to demonstrate how new technologies enabled by cable providers – in this case **Comcast Business Class** – help small business owners and managers address key challenges, solve problems and achieve mission critical objectives.*

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Cloud-based Technology Helps Promotional Outfitters Compete with Much Larger Firms

Introduction

Promotional Outfitters, Inc., a boutique promotional products company in Alpharetta, Ga., goes head-to-head on a daily basis with much larger firms in a very competitive industry. The company stands apart in the way it helps businesses select and use promotional items. Rather than simply putting a logo on a pen, water bottle or laptop bag, company executives work with established marquee brands and emerging firms alike to develop promotional strategies that accomplish the key image and marketing goals of their clients.

“Anyone can do a white tee shirt with an imprint. A lot of people just throw a logo on something without giving it much thought,” says Jack McManus, co-founder of the company and vice president of marketing and sales. “What we do is get involved in the creative process to determine what the right item is for their objectives. We get creative. We don’t just call you a couple of days before a trade show or an event. We tell our clients to stop buying promotional stuff—swag and tchotchkes—and start buying promotional solutions.”

As an example, Promotional Outfitters is working with Heineken on a premium ice bucket— a signature item to be feature in upscale nightclubs during events that feature the popular imported beer.

In delivering a service that is all about branding, it’s important for Promotional Outfitters to project an image that resonates with executives at large and small firms. An important part of that image is established in how a small firm uses technology to communicate and remain in touch with its clients. And in this regard, web technology, accessed by high speed Internet and multiple devices, plays an important role.

Through a needs analysis from Comcast Business Class, it became clear that savings from performance improvements would allow Promotional Outfitters to significantly upgrade its technology.

Situation

Promotional Outfitters operates with a small staff. The company has a four-person payroll, yet it competes against firms with many more employees. Though the company has a small client list, those clients expect the same attention and service from Promotional Outfitters as they would receive from a multi-national firm.

Like many forward-thinking small businesses today, Promotional Outfitters employs technology to level the playing field. But solutions must be self-managing. “As a small company, we don’t have an IT manager to look out for our interests,” McManus says. “We have no one who is on call.” The company uses technologies that require little maintenance and are easy to learn and use.

And, despite the clear advantages technology offers, small businesses often struggle to justify the cost of upgrading technology frequently. Promotional Outfitters is no exception. Companies must strike a balance between staying current and overspending.

During the initial consulting process, Chris Whitaker of Comcast Business Class was able to help. “Through our needs analysis, it became clear right away that the savings and new value-added features we were creating for them would allow the company to significantly upgrade their technology,” says Whitaker. “Their previous Internet service was very slow, and also did not have unified e-mail or the ability to link that with shared calendars or tasks. Through our partnership with Microsoft, we were able to include in the Comcast package all of the basic cloud-based tools that match the capabilities of much bigger businesses.”

Solution

McManus and his associates make extensive use of cloud-based technologies, including Microsoft Outlook, hosted exchange e-mail, tasks, shared calendars, security and 24/7 support, all provided with the Comcast service; Google Alerts; and other broadband technologies. Comcast provides a starter level Internet service to the company with 12 megabit download and two megabit upload speeds.

McManus cautions that while the electronic communications features can help business executives be more efficient, they can also be a time-sucking trap.

“The extra speed is a real benefit for the company because they are constantly exchanging large files, logos, and images in the production of their products,” says Whitaker. Promotional Outfitters also uses Comcast multi-line phone service. Sourcing both services from one provider allows the staff to be more efficient with their most precious asset – their time – while providing their customers and prospects with top-level, professional service.

Scheduling features within Microsoft Outlook are a key tool for Promotional Outfitters. “I think it provides a real sense of professionalism with your customers,” McManus says. “If you set up a meeting for the next week, they see that you take the time to set it up and then send them an invitation with the date. It shows that you are being proactive and that you are genuinely interested in that meeting.”

Before employing the features of Microsoft Outlook, McManus had a “to do” list that kept growing longer every day, without clearing many items or accomplishing much more important work. Outlook’s features allow McManus to employ the approach of touching e-mails one time. He will make an appointment, put it on his Outlook calendar and be done with it until the future meeting reminder. “I’m ready to react to it when it pops up at the appropriate time.”

McManus uses Google Alerts to stay on top of key trends and developments that affect his business, his customers and his other professional interests. By setting up a set of key words— a client name, a category of promotion, or key market research statistics—McManus gets the latest news and analysis that meets his query criteria, sent directly to his e-mail account.

Based on the success his company has experienced with cloud-based business solutions, McManus feels he has the flexibility and connectivity he seeks, coupled with the assurance that Promotional Outfitters has the technical horsepower it needs to outrun competitors, day after day.

The company is exploring other useful tools, particularly social-media venues like Twitter and Facebook. Promotional Outfitters is using these technologies to quickly provide competitive and other information to customers. “If it’s relevant and timely, you can get it right out to the customer. You don’t have to worry about getting it in the right format.”

Managing Technology...Not Letting Technology Manage You

McManus cautions that while the electronic communications features can help business executives be more efficient, they can also be a time-sucking trap. Just the process of checking e-mail, even if looking at an item for only a few seconds, can cost as much as 10-30 minutes in productivity per day.

“E-mail can just run your day and make you feel dizzy,” McManus explains. “If you get hundreds of e-mails a day, then you are distracted all day. When you look at the end of the day, you might think that you accomplished a lot of things, but all you have really done is answer e-mails.

McManus now checks e-mail only three times a day. Most people will open e-mail when they start work each day and stay connected all day. This, he suspects, is probably a mistake. An early crush of messages, many of them irrelevant, can delay the accomplishment of important tasks. So McManus starts his day by focusing on three main tasks. He accomplishes those before his first check of e-mail. He checks his e-mail again in the middle of the day, and once again at the end of the day.

“Urgent” matters often have a way of sorting themselves out between the sessions without his intervention, eliminating numerous exchanges and wasted time, McManus explains. Managing web technologies—rather than letting them manage him—eliminates the stress of dealing with inputs over which he would otherwise have no control.

The tools enabled at no additional charge by Comcast’s comprehensive approach to business connectivity allow McManus to manage his business whether he’s at the office, on the road, or even when he is taking so-called “personal time” – an oxymoron in the world of small business.

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We had a real paradigm shift when we started using the cloud-based Microsoft Outlook tool as a contact management source in 2007,” McManus says. “Outlook e-mail communications synch up with our mobile phones, all of our contacts and our calendar so that we can constantly collaborate with our colleagues, as well as with our clients,” he says.

Comcast’s iPhone app is the link that helps tie it all together. “I remember that day when Mr. McManus realized he could check his address book, contacts and e-mail from a single device out in the field. His face really lit up,” says Whitaker. “That was a cool moment.”

As a small business owner, McManus says it is perfectly typical to work hard most days for 12 hours a day. “The main benefit of being in business for yourself, however, is that you get to choose which 12 hours you work. It gives me a comfort level that I didn’t have before working in large corporations as an employee.”

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About Solutions for Small Business

Solutions for Small Business is an initiative of CTAM, the Cable & Telecommunications Association for Marketing, which is dedicated to helping the cable business grow. Cable companies supporting the initiative include: Armstrong; Atlantic Broadband Business; Bend Broadband Business; Bresnan Business Services; Bright House Networks Business Solutions; Cable One Business; Charter Business; Comcast Business Class; Cox Business; Insight Business; Mediacom Business; Optimum Business; Suddenlink Business and Time Warner Cable Business Class. Small business owners can learn about the initiative at: www.solutionsforsmallbusiness.com.

About Comcast Business Class

To succeed in today's business environment, small companies need every financial advantage they can get. Comcast Business Class offers unparalleled products with flexible, cost saving plans. Comcast Business Class Internet, Voice and TV deliver a wide range of tools designed to provide you with the advanced business technologies to meet your demands, the scalability to grow with your business, and the value to save you money each and every month. You also get 24/7 Business Class support, a dedicated local Account Team, and premium extras – like Microsoft® Communication Services and advanced phone management tools included at no additional charge. To learn more visit businessclass.comcast.com.