An African system for an African Travel Agency.
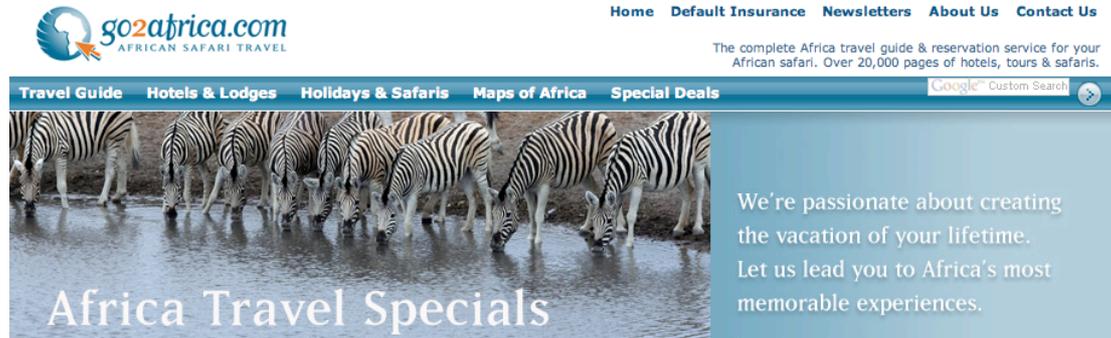
Catalyst moves Go2Africa forward on their journey toward excellence.

Cape Town – [April 2010]

In brief

Go2Africa is a web based travel agency. They act as a travel aggregator and value added travel services provider, purchasing products and services directly from suppliers.

Their travel consultants need to have an extremely high level of destination and product knowledge. In-depth access to travel information is vital to Go2Africa, however they had inherited disparate databases that did not "talk" to each other.

Understanding, managing and using travel information for efficient workflow was impossible. Individual data repositories resulted in fragmented, outdated and unmanageable data. Go2Africa's business information needed to be integrated and presented in a clear, concise format.

Catalyst allowed for rapid development with early wins and deliverables. ViaData set about replacing the core systems, providing a platform for absorbing or integrating each of the existing systems.

Significant improvements were made in access to information, search facilities, accuracy and manageability of data. The ability to make continuous improvements and changes to the system allows Go2Africa to react to market opportunities with speed.

Background

Go2Africa have been offering tourists a wealth of information on Africa travel since 1998. Their websites are in-depth travel guides that include destination information, accommodation listings and sample itineraries. They realised that they could address the unnecessary expense and trouble travelers experienced in working through various different companies in order to book travel destinations and services. They set out to act as a travel aggregator and value added travel services provider, purchasing products and services directly from suppliers, eliminating the middlemen and passing the savings on to travelers, and to value added travel services providers.

Go2Africa is a fully independent and privately owned company. They do not accept paid listings for the travel products on their sites and only feature tours and accommodation they can truthfully recommend. Their travel consultants need to have an extremely high level of destination and product knowledge, professionalism and of course African and/or Indian Ocean Island travel experience.

The Challenge

Go2Africa needed to have in-depth access to its travel information in order to maintain its position as the leading internet-based travel portal in Africa. However, Go2Africa had inherited disparate databases from a previous business that did not "talk" to each other. As a result, they had great difficulty in understanding what information they had available to them and what they could do with it. They also could not access this information in a way that contributed effectively to their business workflow requirements.

Travel consultants were individually creating their own travel information repositories, and this resulted in "islands" of inconsistent and incomplete information being utilised. Accommodation rates, travel costs and Travel product information were not being kept up to date on a consistent basis across all the travel consultants, as each consultant maintained their own information in their own way.

Information was not consolidated and hence no workable information for management, such as trend and financial analysis could be obtained. Together with this, there was no drill down capability and reports could not be verified for integrity. Go2Africa's business information needed to be integrated, consolidated, cleaned, managed and presented in a format that would provide the travel consultants with the clear, concise information they needed as they spoke with their clients.

ViaData

Joanne Dickson (Go2Africa CEO) had had experience of ViaData as a system development business partner. She knew that ViaData has an excellent grasp of the finer detail of data and had already demonstrated an ability to overcome obstacles and complete projects on time. She also felt that ViaData has a "can do' attitude, can communicate effectively, have an ability to understand and concisely summarise business issues and would find a way to solve problems as they arose. Trust was a very important dynamic between the two companies, based on an honest, open relationship and a mutual respect.

The Solution

Go2Africa conducted an internal investigation to decide whether to keep their legacy systems or invest in a completely new application. After a due diligence exercise, it was concluded that whilst an open source new system development solution was appropriate for Go2Africa's web publishing requirement, it was not robust enough to handle their internal business systems. The cost and time to purchase, customise and train staff on an off-the-shelf system also proved to be too prohibitive. A development equity partnership was also investigated, but was not concluded as there was insufficient value derived from the potential partnership to warrant going forward. It was also recognised that Go2Africa had certain finance and time constraints due to the nature of their business, and they needed to get a high value return on their revised systems as soon as possible.

ViaData demonstrated its Catalyst™ prototyping and development platform to Go2Africa, whereby their systems could be prototyped very rapidly from data models and the resultant prototype could then be used to develop the final system, without having to develop from scratch once the prototype had been approved. Furthermore, ad hoc changes could be made and implemented to the system without having to perform any re-writes.

The Catalyst™ environment clearly demonstrated to Go2Africa that very rapid prototyping and development was possible, with early wins and deliverables to the business, in a manner that would least disrupt their travel consultants or back-office infrastructure. Go2Africa were impressed with the company's work ethic and ability to deliver both applications and user requested changes very rapidly, as well as ViaData's value-based pricing and gave the go-ahead for ViaData to re-develop their back-office systems.

It was agreed that an excellent demonstration of Catalyst's abilities would be the re-development of Go2Africa's TravelSense Admin system, wherein all product (travel) related information was stored and maintained. Although this was not the final solution, it would be a significant step and pave the way for future development.

ViaData was also tasked to do a data analysis exercise, preparatory to creating new reports out of the existing disparate system as a quick win. This exercise also established what data Go2Africa had and where it resided. ViaData has since maintained Go2Africa's TravelSense (booking and quoting) and EMS (enquiry management) systems from a data, infrastructure and reporting perspective as an adjunct to the development of Go2Africa's new systems. ViaData has now implemented Go2Africa's new TravelSense Admin system using the Catalyst™ prototyping and development environment in approximately half the time a standard system development would have taken. The results of this implementation include:

- All travel information is now consolidated and administrated centrally.

- Travel consultants now have equal access to all of Go2Africa's travel information, running into thousands of individual products across multiple geographies - an access not previously available.

- Travel consultants can now search all information in the TravelSense database, using any data field and criteria including price, location, facilities, preferences, transport and more.

- A product finder facility has been incorporated to simplify searches - all data can now be sliced and diced according to the traveler's needs.

- The validity of information held in the database can now be managed effectively for all travel consultants, particularly with regard to rates, costs and contract expiration.

- Rate, contract and price changes can be implemented and effected immediately across the company.

A key part of the solution for Go2Africa is the concept of "continuous improvement" whereby application enhancements, updates and new features or functionality can be introduced "on the fly" into the business system with minimum disruption to the business. This has only been made possible through the use of ViaData's Catalyst™ prototyping and development platform. Further, the real speed with which these enhancements and the entire development process take place has proved to be a major strategic advantage to Go2Africa.

"*Just one of the benefits of working with ViaData is that they have business people developing our business system; people who understand our business as well as many of my staff do. They couldn't do that without Catalyst.*"

- Joanne Dickson, MD of Go2Africa

About ViaData

ViaData develops powerful software applications for businesses wanting a fully customised solution that can be deployed rapidly and cost-effectively. Core to the success of the company is the software technology it has created that radically shortens and simplifies software development cycles through the use of a Business Systems Engine. The Catalyst engine leverages the power of industry-standard SQL database environments to reduce project times from months or years to just days or weeks.

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