

CUSTOMERS REALLY DO COME FIRST AT THE NEW WEMBLEY STADIUM

Participant Relationship Management Software from Firstwave Technologies has allowed Wembley Stadium to make an early and trouble-free start on premium seat sales. The customer database at the system's heart puts the company in an enviable position to integrate future technologies in ways that could not only maximise efficiency, but also offer spectators a uniquely personalised experience.

Many companies struggle to retrofit relationship management software to their organisations, pulling in customer data from legacy systems in order to achieve the elusive 'single customer view.' Wembley National Stadium Limited (WNSL) is not in that position. While building a spectacular new venue from the ground up, it also has a 'green-field' opportunity to present its customers with a world-class solution for premium seat sales, and targeted marketing campaigns. No surprise, then, that it has started by implementing an application, with a customer database at its heart: the Firstwave CRM, configured for Sports. Implemented in just six weeks, the solution, designed specifically for the sports industry, supports the sale of premium seats and Corporate Boxes, generating vital cash-flow ahead of the stadium's opening in 2006. As that opening day approaches, the Firstwave solution provides a foundation for a range of hi-tech applications that will add up to a very slick customer experience indeed.

Wembley's IT and Business Process Director Peter Warren says, 'So far, our focus has been on getting the basic processes and procedures right. With those in place, we'll be well positioned to access available technology to ensure that our administration matches the high standard of facilities designed into the new stadium. We know that Firstwave's solution has the reliability and scalability to support whatever we decide to do.'

SPORTING AND ECONOMIC ASSET

WNSL is a wholly owned subsidiary of the Football Association (FA), set up to oversee the re-building of Wembley – from the Stadium itself to its systems and business processes. The project's long-term aim is not only to turn Wembley into the world's most sophisticated stadium, but also to build brand loyalty to the venue itself – something that it has never previously attempted.

Due to open in 2006, the Stadium, already acclaimed as one of the world's top facilities, is taking shape on the site of the former twin towers. A 133-metre high arch will span the stadium, supporting a partially retractable roof to shelter spectators, and at the same time adding a graceful new landmark to London's skyline. 90,000 fans – over 10,000 more than in the old stadium - will be accommodated in style and comfort, with 30% more seat space than before, ample catering facilities for everyone, and more lavatories than any other building in the world!. The stadium is expected to generate approximately £230m in visitor expenditure per annum, contributing over £62 million to London's economy each year. The new stadium will generate more than 7,500 jobs - 2,800 more than in the previous stadium.

With a venue of this scope and size to market and support, a significant amount of effort and energy needed to be dedicated to building the right infrastructure, the right processes and finding the right technology partner to help deliver on ambitious corporate goals.

ADVANCE SALES OF PREMIUM SEATS

Accordingly, on joining WNSL at the beginning of 2003, Warren's first priority was to enable the launch of Wembley's premium seat offering known as Club Wembley. According to the business plan, 160 corporate boxes and 15,000 10-year seat licences were to go on sale in 2003. Boxes are leased for between 3 and 10 years and are available not only for every event, but for other activities (for example, for company meetings). 10 year seat licences include 12 key sporting events each year as well as entitling the holder to first refusal on other events such as concerts.

Major events in the football calendar offer the best opportunity for promoting both business and personal entertainment, and so Wembley aimed to start selling during the FA Cup Final on 20th May. That left only a small time window in which to implement the necessary support systems. Nonetheless, Warren resisted any temptation to start grappling with systems issues straight away; business processes had to be designed first. For seat sales, a neatly staged process emerged, beginning with a customer's expression of interest and concluding when a contract has been signed and a deposit paid. In time, the technology selected by Wembley, and the database that technology would build, would form the foundation on which these business processes would depend.

CHOOSING FIRSTWAVE

Not until late March, however, was Wembley ready to think about the systems themselves. Warren describes the choice of package as a 'no-brainer'. "Our colleagues at the FA had been working extensively with Firstwave for about 12 months and were impressed with the flexibility and reliability of their product. With just over six weeks before we needed to start selling, we couldn't afford any show-stoppers, and the FA's experience told us there wouldn't be any." Warren was impressed by Firstwave's ability to deliver comprehensive functionality in a straightforward manner. "Some of the big packages are cumbersome to implement. Firstwave is simple to implement, yet so easily adaptable, enabling it to cope with the idiosyncrasies of our business. The software, and the way in which the Firstwave team approached the whole project was 'adaptive rather than prescriptive', just as they claim. The solution is also designed modularly, focused around a central module that makes it easy to build bridges between applications."

In addition, the Firstwave solution met with approval from Wembley's marketing department as it truly enabled the organisation to define the systems around its customers; putting the customers at the centre of Wembley's business.

The fact that Firstwave could be trusted to get on with their side of the project was essential, given the other tasks on the critical path to live date. To eliminate potential hardware bottlenecks, Wembley needed to implement network infrastructure upgrades plus new network management technology. It also had to set up a call centre, complete with call management software and IP telephony, and capable of processing high call volumes at any one time. Over the course of the six weeks from March to mid-May, Firstwave worked with WNSL to develop the software and further streamline Wembley's business processes to ensure a seamless fit between the technology and the business. In May, Firstwave delivered and implemented the software and helped Wembley upload its existing contact and prospect lists into the database. Firstwave also implemented a specially-designed additional software layer, to sit on top of the software package and allow customers to input their applications via the Wembley web site (www.wembleystadium.com) instead of telephoning the

call centre. The system also automatically processes and fulfils seat applications based upon in-built business rules – a process that is vital given the amount of interest in key seat locations and seat packages.

SMOOTH RUNNING

The Firstwave system and call centre went live bang on cue on 13th May. Every enquiry went straight on to the system, so that the customer database began to grow from day one.

Since live date, Firstwave and Wembley have continued to collaborate closely to optimise the use of the system. They have found ways to streamline administration processes further by taking better advantage of features within the software. For example, when a prospect registers on-line, the system now automatically runs off the necessary form letter and address label, minimising the administrative effort associated with direct mail brochures.

While Firstwave staff engage in frequent visits to Wembley Stadium's offices for meetings, the system is supported remotely. "They've been quick to sort out any issues we've raised, leaving us free to get on with the all-important job of filling seats and selling contracts," says Warren. For minor amendments, such as screen layout changes, Wembley is now self-sufficient, since, as well as providing standard user training, Firstwave has trained internal administrators.

HI-TECH FUTURE

Warren is the first to admit that, implementation timescales aside, Wembley has yet to tackle anything particularly ambitious around Firstwave CRM, configured for Sports. But he and his colleagues are well aware of the possibilities opened up by having a powerful customer database and flexible relationship management solution available so early in the project.

One area of potential is customer management and targeted marketing. Using the customer database in conjunction with mobile telephony and smart cards, it would be possible to organise entertainment within the stadium in sophisticated ways. "For example, smart cards linked to a customer database could control access to areas of the site, for example. Customers could use the same cards to pay for purchases, which could be a lot quicker than taking cash and would also allow us to learn about their habits and preferences. Then we could start to do things like identifying customers who always buy refreshments at the start of a match, and sending them a text message inviting them to buy it half an hour earlier in return for a discount." These initiatives could improve spectators' experiences immensely, as well as contributing to profitability, Warren believes. Moving forward, Wembley Stadium could use this understanding to create specific campaigns to better market or sell features to the individuals to whom it would be most pertinent.

For now, Wembley has more immediate systems concerns on its agenda, such as the need to fulfil seat orders and cater for the transfer of unneeded seats for particular events. Some of these jobs cannot be tackled until the layout of the stadium's seating, including the seat numbers, is finalised.

Eventually, Wembley will need to implement a variety of specialised systems, probably from several different vendors, as well as possibly outsourcing some functions such as ticketing; Firstwave's software database will provide the hub around which all these applications will be integrated. There may be mileage in connecting the FA's customer base - covering England supporters generally - with

Wembley Stadium's own information about customers. Warren comments, "There would be obvious advantages to sharing our data: we could start to understand customers' needs much better if we had all the information about people who come to England games in one place for example." Although it is more difficult to generate loyalty to a venue than to a football club, for example, a venue like Wembley Stadium is exceptionally well-placed to create meaningful customer relationships. It is on the premise that this goal would in time need to be achievable, that Firstwave and WNSL together developed the Wembley solution.

All this is in the future. What has Firstwave done for Wembley to date? Warren sums up: "Basically, Firstwave has underpinned the success of the project so far - there was no other way to deliver what we wanted within the time that we had. The secret of being so fast off the mark was the flexibility and clarity of the software, plus the fact that we had a partner we could trust and rely on."

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