

A site for sore eyes

Paperstone has established itself as something of a trailblazer with its approach to ecommerce. George Carey meets up with the company's MD, Max Trotter-Landry, and IT director, George Harris, a week after the launch of its new look website to find out about the company's philosophy and translating that onto customer screens

It's office supplies, but not as we know it. From its central London location to a staff made up of more technical experts than salespeople, Paperstone is a dealer doing things a little differently. It's been an eventful few weeks for the metropolitan merchants, with a BOSS award for e-tailer of the year accompanying the launch of their new website. So what is it that sets this dealer's digital discourse apart from the rest? "We feel in many ways that what's enabled us to deliver a successful website is the fact that we've got a completely dedicated team of experts building it," says Max Trotter-Landry, Paperstone's MD. "Lots of other companies outsource or buy something off the shelf, but what we've got is a series of specialists who operate in different areas of the design process. We pull them all together in-house and with that we've delivered a very bespoke site geared to what our customers want." George Harris, IT director at Paperstone and the man behind the new site, emphasises the importance of the personality projected through it: "I think we've really managed to get across the personal touch on our website. ➤

We've got a dedicated account management team that speaks to customers and deals with their issues and at the same time we're able to represent that service through our brand, on the website." Crucially, it's transmitting into increased business as well, as Trotter-Landry explains: "This year sales are up 25%, so we're very pleased and I think, apart from the launch of the website, that's our biggest success. New customer conversion is up by 30% as well, which is fantastic."

So what does the new site actually deliver? "We wanted customers to be able to find products quicker, so we bought in a new search engine that's faster and has spell correction and autocomplete. We also made the new site a little wider so we can provide more information and it works better on tablet and mobile devices as well, which is an area that we see growing massively in UK e-tail," says Harris. Trotter-Landry continues: "I think the key with that is to enable customers to get to a product very quickly across a number of different platforms. We're seeing increasing traffic from mobile devices and tablets, so we're making it easy to find products wherever you're coming from."

The changes made to the site would have been counterproductive, if they weren't attuned to what Paperstone's existing customers wanted, so market research was crucial to the process. "We did extensive interviews with a lot of customers and then built up different customer profiles and tried to ensure that the new site could deliver what all of those customers were looking for," recalls Trotter-Landry. "You make a judgement call on which of those customers is more important and then try to cater to them more than anyone else. The key was a lot of upfront research and involving our customers in every stage of the development. It's an explorative and engaged process with the customers and a long, drawn-out project." Harris agrees that customer involvement was an integral part of the process: "We've got some great customers who are very loyal to our brand, so they're the people we've really focused on involving. We wouldn't put a website live that our customers and sales team weren't happy with; we were adamant that it had to be perfect." Feedback is an essential part of the on-going improvement of the site as well. "We have an automated third-party review platform that enables every customer to give feedback and we display it all on the website, whether it's good or bad. At the moment there's about 750 reviews on there," explains Trotter-Landry. Harris sees this function as vital: "I think it's really important for our brand, which is about trust and transparency, to have immediate feedback on the website. That honesty aspect is crucial."

At Paperstone they're keen to keep things in the family and have opted against seeking outside help, in favour of investing in their own

team. "Including myself, we've got a team of six technical staff covering design, marketing, usability, business analysis and software development," says Harris. "We didn't want someone who doesn't really have an interest in the company making decisions about the look and feel of the site and making assumptions about what our customers want." Trotter-Landry also looks at it with the long-term in mind: "We have a combination of industry experience and the ability to deliver and execute complex technical projects, like this one. We've kept that core knowledge in-house because we wanted to build up a resource, which we're now drawing on constantly. We've currently got more technical staff than sales, although I imagine as we grow, that balance may shift. For the time being, there's an enormous investment in R&D and IT"

Many dealers see online ordering as an obstacle to the kind of personal service that marks them out from their competitors, so how does Paperstone strike the balance between convenience and rapport? "I think the key is to give people what they want," opines Trotter-Landry. Some people enjoy ordering online, so you need to give them a website where it's very easy to do that. Others prefer to order over the phone, so you've got to be prepared to do that as well. We want to make it as easy as possible for people to use our website but they can deal with us in any way they like." Harris doesn't see online ordering and strong relationships as mutually exclusive: "I think it's possible to deliver that personal touch online and that's been one of our major focuses for the new site. Giving people the right signals and the right information on the site, so that

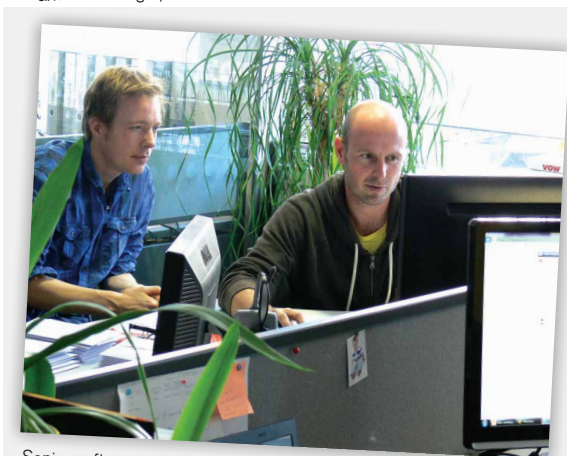
“ We have a combination of industry experience and the ability to deliver and execute complex technical projects

they feel comfortable using it to place their order." It seems to be working, according to Trotter-Landry: "I think around 80% of our business is through customers placing their own orders online but people still tend to place larger orders over the phone."

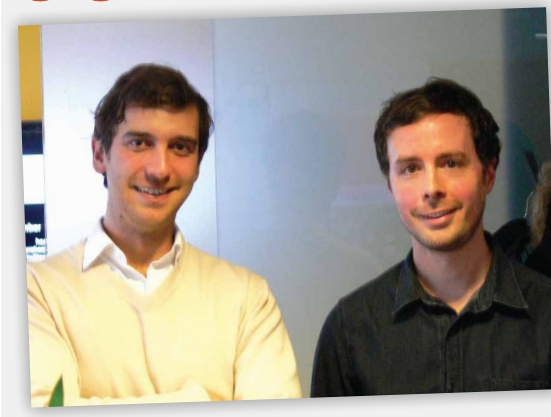
So what advice do these two have for those looking to dip a toe into the online world? "I think you need to understand your own brand and what you mean to your customers. Setting up a web shop blindly would be a mistake," asserts Harris. "If you have a full understanding of why your customers deal with you and not someone else, you can use technology to reach out to more people with that message. That's what we've tried to do consistently over the years." Both are agreed that commitment is ➤



Business analyst Ed Beerbohm and design and marketing specialist Alex Brignall



Senior software developer Henry Barker and sales director Jim Brown



MD Max Trotter-Landry and IT director George Harris

key. "It's an obsessive process that you have to go through, to get this right. You don't just accidentally build a good website," says Trotter-Landry, with the air of man who's suffered for his art. "You need to either have the core skills in-house or be very lucky and find those people elsewhere and combine them with your industry knowledge. It's not for everyone." He concludes: "I don't think every dealer would be better off as an ecommerce website, they're different businesses."

The complex world of SEO is constantly evolving and is very important to those looking to get ahead in online sales. Harris is mindful of the changes and encourages the shift towards a focus on customer experience, rather than technicalities and key words: "Google has made a couple of substantial changes to its algorithms this year that have affected retailers across the UK, not just in our industry. It's key that online businesses are able to react to those changes and do something positive. In recent years, it's become a lot more difficult." He continues: "Now Google focuses on sites that offer the best experiences to customers, which is the way it should be. It shouldn't be about how many links you've got to other sites or other incidental factors like that. Our focus is on great on-site content and making sure that we obey the basic rules of SEO." Trotter-Landry is equally supportive of this shift and thinks that the days of fast-win tactics and technical trickery are behind us: "Google is becoming increasingly sophisticated and if you try to

cheat, you're probably going to get caught. If you get blacklisted, it's game over from an SEO point of view. You've got to give customers what they want, be informative, usable and accessible. If you follow those mantras, then your site will do well."

It's with that attitude in mind that the pair is quick to dispel the notion that the impressive amount of non-commercial content on the site is uploaded to climb a few extra rungs on the Google ladder. "I'm not sure of the immediate SEO value of those pages. There is a benefit to having them there, but they've actually become quite a core part of our brand,"

“ We wouldn't put a website live that our customers and sales team weren't happy with; we were adamant that it had to be perfect ”

explains Harris. "The news section in particular has been a great way for us to move into social media, sharing quirky stories about the office supplies industry, rather than just talking about our product range, which people

don't want to share with their friends because it's not that interesting." This goes back to the company's mission statement to deliver the most personal experience possible, through an online service. "Customers engage with the stories and things like our 'contact us' page involving Ruby [the dog]. The news stories allow us to put a bit of character out there and tell our customers what we're all about," says Harris. Trotter-Landry concludes: "It's a very useful way for us to get across what we're like as a business and being able to put our values through this channel, enables our existing customers to see that reinforced in a different way."

So what's next for our intrepid online explorers? "The key message with the new website, is that this isn't the end result, it's the beginning of the next stage of our web platform. This site will be changing very rapidly," says Trotter-Landry. "What George and his team have done is give us a technical infrastructure which allows us to move very swiftly." Harris is in agreement that finishing this huge project is just the start of the real work: "It means that we can focus on the customer experience much more, now that we feel we've brought the site into the 21st century. We can experiment with features, try lots of things out and really lead the way in the industry." The passion and expertise is clear to see and judging by the industry recognition and increasing profits, it is getting results. The future looks very bright for Paperstone. DS

