



## Hallmark's Fresh Start

The greeting card company **built a new, faster website** and saw a 30% uptick in its customer conversion rate. **By Patrick Thibodeau**

**F**OR MONTHS, Hallmark Cards had been building a new website in parallel with its old one. Late one night last September, Hallmark's online team arrived at its moment of truth: the switch-over. Would the new site work? Paul Barker, vice president and general manager of Hallmark Digital, which manages the company's online presence, wasn't sure.

"We were all standing around waiting for it to break, waiting for it to crash, and it didn't — it was a real confidence booster for the entire organization," Barker says.

But he still had concerns. Would conversion rates, or sales, be hurt? The project was a complete re-architecture and platform shift.

"We expected to have a lower conversion rate because we thought, with a new site, it was going to take some time for people to get used to it," Barker says. Instead, Hallmark reports that its conversion rate increased by 30%.

The company also says customers experienced a 370% improvement

in site response time. On the old site, "response time would erode significantly at the peak times," Barker says. "That was unacceptable."

The improvement began when Hallmark hired Savvis as its hosting provider and Infosys, an India-based service provider, as its primary application developer. Response times from 2009 to 2010 improved by a factor of two or three, but after the new Hallmark.com went live, the average response time for the month of December improved by more than 50% from the previous year.

The exact before-and-after response times weren't immediately available from Hallmark, but Ken Godskind, chief strategy officer at AlertSite, a Web performance management company, says the previous figures "must have been really scary" if Hallmark is reporting a 370% improvement.

At *Computerworld's* request, AlertSite benchmarked Hallmark.com's home page from 12 cities on the afternoon of April 13 and came up with an average response time of 2.47 seconds, putting it at about 15th in AlertSite's most recent ranking of response times for the retail sites it monitors.

Barker says that AlertSite's findings mirror Hallmark's data. "We feel we are performing very well," he says.

Prior to the switch-over, Hallmark was adding a growing catalog of features that included a loyalty points program, address books and reminders of key events such as birthdays. And it was adding that functionality to a site that offered more than 5,000 products.

The additions produced a complex code layer that hurt performance and made it difficult to

add new customer features. That's why Hallmark decided to remake its site. "This gave us an ability to have a fresh start," Barker says.

The company stopped using IBM's WebSphere software and switched to Microsoft's .Net, because Microsoft offered lower licensing and maintenance costs.

Barker doesn't credit any single change with the conversion rate increase. For example, he points out that optimizing search and navigation also made it easier for customers to find products.

Khalid Saleh, co-founder of Invesp Consulting, which helps companies improve their conversion rates, says it's hard to pin upticks in sales on improved response times, but when the average response time drops from 12 seconds to 5 seconds, "you can see a huge uplift in customers" — and conversion rate increases of as high as 12%.

Barker says the experience has given his organization "a lot of confidence that we can take on even more — whether more services, products or functionality." ♦



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