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A Sound On-Line Experience

Musician's Friend's network visibility solution upholds on-line experience

During the 2006 holiday season, Guitar Center's e-commerce platform, www.guitarcenter.com, enabled shoppers to redeem gift cards on line. "If this operation breaks down, however, there will be direct bottom-line results," D.J. Buell, VP of IT for Guitar Center subsidiary Musician's Friend, told *Retail Technology Quarterly* during the holiday season.

To avoid this detrimental mishap, Musician's Friend is using a network visibility solution that detects potential pitfalls and upholds a superior on-line shopping experience.

Musician's Friend started as a humble retailer selling music gear from a barn in southern Oregon in 1983. After becoming a wholly owned subsidiary of Guitar Center in 1999, the company is now called the world's largest direct marketer of music gear.

Currently, Musician's Friend offers more than 36,000 products, including guitars, basses, keyboards, percussion, amps, and recording, mixing, lighting and DJ gear. Shoppers can purchase merchandise from the retailer's mail-order catalogs or its Web site, www.musiciansfriend.com. The division is also responsible for the catalogs and Web sites of www.guitarcenter.com and www.musicandartscenter.com, the e-commerce site for Guitar Center's newest division, Music & Arts Center, Inc. This Frederick, Md.-based musical instruments retailer serves the new musician and emphasizes rentals, music lessons, and band and orchestra instrument sales.

Musician's Friend is always adding new on-line features and functionality to meet its growing customer demand and improve the customer experience. Historically, the company's biggest weakness was a lack of insight into how these additions were affecting its on-line shoppers.

"We developed all of our e-commerce platforms ourselves, including our monitoring and performance-measurement tools," Buell explained. "We had no instant insight into the types of problems that our shoppers were experiencing, where they occurred and when."

When the company revised its checkout from 12 steps to two in the third quarter of 2005, for example, shoppers were affected. The site had trouble accepting ZIP codes, as well as one of the company's private-label credit cards.

"However, we heard about these issues very slowly," he said. "Customers complained via e-mail or called in and spoke to our customer-service agents. It could easily take a couple of weeks for our team to become aware of the problem."

Developers were also challenged by how to interpret customer messages. "They were forced into a test lab or even tap into the live site to re-create the situation," Buell said. "We were handling issues blindly, and debugging-processes were lengthy. In some cases, it took several weeks before we nailed the problem."

Eager to gain greater visibility into what its customers were experiencing on line, Musician's Friend began its search for a customer experience management solution.



New software is helping Guitar Center's on-line platforms address user problems faster and with more accuracy.



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The retailer required a solution that was scalable enough to support its growing customer volume, delivered ease of use and most importantly, featured robust functionality.

These criteria led Musician's Friend to the TeaLeaf CX solution in January 2006. The software, from TeaLeaf, San Francisco, provides enterprisewide visibility into each user's unique on-line interactions.

Upon installing the system on its network in March 2006, the chain was ready to begin troubleshooting its e-commerce platform. TeaLeaf CX features "sniffers," or a passive program that monitors and captures all traffic, activity and bottlenecks occurring on the network, Buell explained.

"Once this data is captured, it is translated into actionable information that we can analyze to improve our business," he added. "More specifically, it defines events that occur, enabling us to get a feel for the trending of events."

And these events aren't always negative. In October, for example, the software detected a sudden surge in sales.

"While a sudden ramp-up in sales is a great problem to have, this was a level far beyond our expectations," he explained. "We knew there was something pumping these sales."

Buell's hunch was right. Upon tapping TeaLeaf CX, a developer learned that a new promotion was causing increased shopper volume. (Called Stupid Deal of the Day, the promotion features a single product that is sold at a rock-bottom price for 24 hours.)

"We didn't intend to use TeaLeaf to discover things that are not problems, but this experience illustrated how the solution validates what is happening on our site, what customers are viewing and where they are coming from," he said.

Musician's Friend is also "comforted by the visibility TeaLeaf CX will provide as we make improvements to our e-commerce features," Buell said.

Upholding the experience: The company's newest site, www.guitarcenter.com, adds new functionality regularly. The site's newest addition, which launched in time for the 2006 holiday season, is an interface that enables the retailer to accept the Guitar Center Gear electronic gift card on line.

"It is important for us to support multichannel features. Since the gift card is integrated to our checkout process, we need to ward off any problems," he explained. "We are comforted to know the solution can help us with this and upcoming changes."

At presstime, the chain was still "getting familiar with the technology and learning about which events to watch," he said.

Though looking ahead, Buell's team expects to benefit from the solution's troubleshooting techniques. "Since we develop all of our own code, there can be performance issues," he explained. "Although we are not there yet, we expect the solution to greatly assist us in troubleshooting any performance delays caused by coding issues, including when issues occur and who is experiencing the problems."

The solution will also be expanded beyond the IT team and into the hands of the chain's contact-center team. In fact, the chain expects these associates to be the main users of the solution. The chain's call center is based in Medford, Ore. Historically, call-center agents focused on entering sales via telephone. However, as Musician's Friend makes TeaLeaf CX accessible to call-center agents, these associates can view on-line customer-navigation history. This data will enable agents to bolster their conversations with shoppers, and even upsell merchandise.

Buell told *Retail Technology Quarterly* that the retailer plans to add the functionality by the end of this quarter. **RTQ**

—Deena M. Amato-McCoy
(damato@chainstoreage.com)

Wal-Mart Monitors On-Line Shopping

As consumers grow more comfortable shopping on line, they expect their e-commerce experiences to mirror in-store visits. This is keeping all retailers under consumer scrutiny—even Wal-Mart Stores.

Yet, even under the consumer's fickle, often unforgiving analysis, a majority of retailers are struggling to achieve this level, according to a recent Harris Interactive survey.

More specifically, nine out of 10 shoppers experience issues when trying to complete a transaction on line. Worse, 40% of these shoppers abandon their on-line shopping carts, the study reported. To ensure that its shoppers are not negatively impacted by e-commerce application snafus, Wal-Mart is employing the expertise of TeaLeaf, according to a spokeswoman for the San Francisco-based vendor.

By adding TeaLeaf CX, the chain plans to detect and resolve any performance snags before they affect the customer shopping experience. Wal-Mart reportedly implemented the solution last fall, according to a statement by TeaLeaf. The Bentonville, Ark.-based retailer could not be reached for comment.



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