Strong online growth for Vivabox with flexible Combell hosting

The Belgian gift solutions specialist Vivabox has been working with Combell since 2011 for hosting its online sales and redemption platform. "Every year, we see an important peak appear in our sales figures around the turn of the year", says Michel Tordoir, finance & administration manager with Vivabox. "Using Combell's elastic infrastructure and flexible contractual conditions, we can offer an outstanding online shopping experience at affordable rates to our customers."

"Our mission is to offer a suitable present to everybody. Our unique strength is that we combine two things while doing that: a gift voucher that can be redeemed later on for a product or service, as well as a tangible gift that is immediately available in the box", Michel Tordoir (finance & administration manager for Vivabox) describes. "Every present hence has a double effect." Since the launch of the Belgian company in 2003, more than three million Vivaboxes have already been sold. After a takeover by the Sodexo group, Vivabox is carefully pursuing its international expansion. In this respect, online media play an ever-increasing role.

"Initially, the Vivabox was a concept mainly aimed at the retail market. Currently, online sales represent twelve to fifteen percent of our activities. It is definitely a strategic channel", says Tordoir. "Retail has become a mature market for us, with stable sales figures. We are convinced that our growth for the coming years will be concentrated in two branches: online sales and the business market (B2B)."

Performance is a major factor for user experience

DThe Vivabox website is not only a direct sales channel. "In addition to our Internet customers – people who look for a suitable gift online, browse our catalogue and buy a Vivabox – there is a

THE CHALLENGE
of VIVABOX

- Guarantee fast loading times
- Redundancy and flexible computing power
- Sometimes more than 100.000 page requests a day
- Catalogue-driven website
- Yearly peak period in December
- Synchronisation with Dynamics NAV
- Limit expenses on ICT infrastructure and software licences

THE SOLUTION
of Combell

- Cloud environment
- Tailored system architecture
- Managed open-source solutions (Apache, Drupal, Linux, Solr, Übercart, Varnish)
- Combell hardware with service guarantee and hardware spare parts on location

THE BENEFITS OF COMBELL
according to VIVABOX

- 24/7 monitoring and technical support
- Flexible contract divided in two periods
- Robust environment
- Redundant infrastructure during the most critical period
- Average loading time of 1.6 second per page

Michel Tordoir, Vivabox: "Around New Year, we generate about two thirds of our total business. Thanks to flexible contractual conditions, Combell offers us a fully redundant infrastructure during that period."

Combell
Your host on the internet

"The better loading times are in seconds, the better the conversion rate and the higher your ranking in Google."

second group of visitors, consisting of people who already received a gift voucher. And both groups are very important to us", says Michel Tordoir.

"Internet is very important for the B2B market. It seldom happens that companies offer a tangible Vivabox to their staff, because the employer does not necessarily want to give the same Vivabox to everyone. That is why B2B customers often choose a gift voucher, which employees can only redeem via our website."

"Customers expect that we continuously provide more information online. For each Vivabox, you can now find a virtual leaflet that describes in detail what you can do with it and where to redeem your gift voucher, in case you lose the leaflet you received or for information purposes before deciding to purchase. The website has gradually expanded because of the increasing volume of information provided. Moreover, we wanted to evolve, technologically speaking, toward a dynamic platform that would perform more efficiently. Finally, we wanted to link the website directly to our ERP environment, in order to automate several tasks."

Flawless availability and performance are determining factors for user experience, Michel Tordoir underlines. "We offer an increasing number of different Vivaboxes online. Search strings on the website therefore become more complex over time. Also, visitors are increasingly prone to leave a website when it is too slow. That is why we find robust performance very important."

ERP integration with Dynamics NAV
"Every time we sell a Vivabox, we want precise traceability for every voucher in circulation. When we sell ten 'restaurant' boxes, there are ten separate vouchers circulating", Michel Tordoir confirms. "We manage all the voucher numbers in a central database. Therefore, we also wanted to automatically register the number of the vouchers, have an invoice generated automatically and afterwards link a payment to the correct invoice. Before that, the online sales process led to a lot of administrative work. That is why we chose to have

the site redesigned by PHPro in 2011. Since then, everything is automated."

"The Vivabox website constantly synchronises with an ERP (enterprise resource planning) management system in Microsoft Dynamics NAV", says Pieter Caluwaerts, consultant with PHPro. "That section was built by iFacto, which is part of the Cronos group just as PHPro is. Every voucher that is sold is activated from Dynamics NAV and uploaded to the web shop. That way, someone who e.g. received an 'elektro' gift, can also redeem the voucher online. And there is also the reverse synchronisation, from web shop to Dynamics NAV, to transfer new orders and corresponding customer information to logistics and billing."

"The exchange of information happens via web services. There are other synchronisations as well, with parties like e.g. the Reward points of Miles & More. Specifically for 'elektro' gifts, Vivabox works with Nebus, a third party that guarantees exchanges. And Combell makes sure that everything can be redeemed securely."

Fully redundant around New Year
""Following the advice of both the Sodexo group and PHPro, we chose Combell as our hosting partner", says Michel Tordoir. "We achieved a very flexible collaboration. Ten months a year, we have a normal hosting environment at our disposal. And from November to January, we can avail ourselves of a fully redundant infrastructure. Around New Year, we indeed fulfil two thirds of all our online business."

"As Vivabox already had its own website before, Google Analytics could provide us a pretty good impression of normal visitor traffic. Starting from that information, Combell prepared an infrastructure proposal: server type, processor, RAM, etc.", Pieter Caluwaerts remembers. "Together with Combell, we carried out many tests right away, in order to determine what the maximum limit of the infrastructure was. The risk of a bottleneck was mostly linked to the number of session users."

Pieter Caluwaerts, PHPro: "All the frequent search strings are retrieved super fast. That is profitable for Vivabox, because speed equals a better conversion rate."

"The conclusion was that it was possible to work with single infrastructure, but then the classic peak in visitor numbers for December would better not double. And that is risky business. Hence our more logical transition to a fully redundant environment."

"Initially, Vivabox had plans to be hosted within the Sodexo group, but the available bandwidth was insufficient. In November 2011, Combell was outstandingly helpful in getting the site live on an efficient platform. We immediately got started during a peak period – in redundant mode. It was a 'make or break' situation. And everything went splendidly."

"We did not experience a single moment of downtime with Combell. We are very satisfied. Nevertheless, our final objective is still to transfer our web infrastructure to Sodexo", says Michel Tordoir. "It is very pleasant to notice that Combell offers us all the technical support we need during this exercise. If we finally make the switch from Combell to our own group, users will not notice a thing."

Varnish Cache for ultra fast loading times

PHPro chose Drupal and Übercart as building blocks for the new Vivabox website. "The people at Vivabox wanted to be able to add content themselves via a content management system (CMS). The product catalogue also required a very user-friendly design", Pieter Caluwaerts explains. "At the same time, there was a demand for strong performance to minimize loading times of the pages."

"During the peak period, Vivabox has to process over 100.000 page requests a day. But even so, we succeeded to guarantee an average loading time of 1.6 second. You cannot achieve this with Drupal out-of-the-box. We use Varnish Cache for everything that is not session-specific: people who have not logged in or who still have an empty shopping cart. Varnish recognizes the pages that are already cached and presents them to the surfer right away. So, the Apache web server is no longer used for this purpose. The better loading times are, the better the conversion rate and the higher your ranking in Google."

"Around New Year, we make the environment fully redundant. We then use a load balancer, with the Varnish Cache, the web servers and the redundant database in master-slave configuration behind it. This is how we achieve double performance and avoid the risk of a failing server making everything fall apart."

"Combell takes care of the entire infrastructure. Together, we have developed a roadmap to make the switch to a redundant environment without downtime", says Pieter Caluwaerts. "The things that are involved in this process are, to name a few: setting up the load balancer, the switch of DNS data and IP addresses. Combell also provides a second web server with Varnish Cache, Solr and a number of specific settings via Drush – Drupal's command-line interface."

"Combell also takes care of the reverse procedure after the peak period. We agree on a date with Vivabox on which to perform those tasks, generally at night. Our collaboration is truly excellent. Our customer can rest easy. All he knows is when we start making the environment redundant."

Powerful search function with Drupal and Solr

"The Vivabox site is a catalogue-driven system. This is somewhat different from a flat website, namely because the search strings are much more complex. For instance, Vivabox offers a number of categories, while you can also search by price category. Such a combined search requires a lot of computing power. This is why we wanted to use caching here as well", Pieter Caluwaerts explains.

"We chose the combination of Drupal with Solr for the search engine. Every search result – which is also a complicated combination of several keywords or categories – is saved in Varnish Cache. When someone searches the next time around with the same criteria, the result is immediately retrieved from the cache. This makes your environment much more efficient, but also markedly more user-friendly. All the frequent search strings are indeed retrieved super fast. That is profitable for Vivabox, because speed equals a better conversion rate."

"Visitors are increasingly prone to leave a website when it is too slow."

"Flexibility, combined with the outstanding support Combell provides, were determining factors for us."

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