

CASE STUDY

Grand Rapids Association of Realtors

Award-Winning Success with Zend Server on IBM i



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Rick Baumann, director of information services, Grand Rapids Association of Realtors

Challenges

- Bring website in-house
- Keep loyal users happy

Solution

- Zend Server on IBM i

Results

- Seamless migration
- Increase in website usage
- Ability to quickly make changes and updates
- COMMON Innovation Award

The leader in online real estate, the Grand Rapids Association of Realtors (GRAR) has been paving the way for internet property searching since 1999. Now an award-winning success, GRAR has seen many levels of change before reaching its current state. What started as a website build on

an AS/400 transitioned into a website that was managed out-of-house by a third-party on a Windows platform. And then later, the site was brought back in-house to run on IBM i for more control and innovation.

While all that change can bring uncertainty, GRAR has been able to keep their loyal users happy — even as the number of competitors has increased dramatically since 1999. That’s because throughout the years, GRAR has ensured that one thing remains the same: the high level of trust and confidence GRAR website users have in their property search resource.

A Seamless Migration

When you have the leading property search website, the natural decision might be to leave it alone. However, GRAR kept running into budget and time issues after they had engaged a third-party to manage the website. The company realized it could bring the website back in house again, especially since it has an excellent development team. Julie Rietberg, chief executive officer at GRAR, knew that the risk of

migrating and updating the website would be worth it, and she trusted her team to make it a seamless success. What she wasn't expecting was for everything to go as smoothly as it did.

"We were able to get our proof of concept up and running in one day, and installed WordPress in a couple of hours," said Rietberg. "After seeing the early prototype so quickly, I gave my team the green light to go ahead with the project. I have complete trust in their abilities."

By running on IBM i 7.1 with Zend Server, with the backend business logic all in RPG, GRAR IT staff members Larry Amond, senior developer, and Rick Baumann, director of information services, were confident they could build and maintain a robust and reliable website that their users would appreciate. And they were right.

"We had no migration pain. No hiccups and no fails," said Baumann. "Our environment runs and helps us avoid server sprawl. We scale, it scales with us. It's bulletproof."

Considering the plethora of options to build and manage web applications, Amond expressed his conviction on the choice. "We're doing something great here. We're using WordPress as a front-end web service and CMS without the blog. And it works, this isn't theoretical. I wouldn't hesitate to do it again."

Baumann summarized the project, "Pound for pound we're doing something very cost effective. I'd encourage everyone to consider looking at IBM i with Zend Server; you just can't beat it. There's complexity involved with keeping everything up and running in an Intel/Wintel environment, yet for us it's been simple."

More Than 1 Billion Users

After rolling out their new website, the GRAR team was anxious to hear the feedback from their many loyal users. Rietberg and her team have always been proud of their committed community of users. But change is hard, and sometimes users leave for other avenues instead of adopting new interfaces. Not so in this case. The GRAR team was amazed at the traffic on their new website, and noticed that it

was a very short time before people were back to praising the site's look, feel, and usability. Despite the struggle many users face when they encounter change, their users were pleased.

In fact, after only one year of the site being live, GRAR had passed the one billion mark of properties returned from searches, and it's continuing to increase.

Because their website is developed and managed internally, it's become incredibly flexible. The team no longer has to weigh budget considerations against website changes, and they don't have to worry about changes taking a long time to reach production. They're now very flexible and can make all web changes in a timely matter, pushing out these changes as often as they'd like.

According to Rietberg, the biggest benefit isn't the money GRAR saved by bringing their web development environment in-house. Instead, it's the ability to accommodate new needs on the fly. "Now we can feel comfortable and get creative. We're back to having fun again with the creative 'what if' conversations. It's much more fun. And you can't put a price on that."

A Platform for Innovation and Industry Recognition

Up next for GRAR is a challenge all companies know well: mobile optimization. The company currently has a responsive website, but it's not optimized for mobile access. With Zend Server, GRAR can leverage all site data natively to provide a user-enriched experience for their already happy customers.

The organization's website has earned much recognition, including the COMMON/IBM 2017 Power Systems Innovation award. By taking advantage of technologies such as Zend Server and IBM i, GRAR can stay focused on providing the best possible website experience for users, and serve as an example for other industry companies to follow.