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Marketing & Sales Department

Centurion Vehicles, Inc. Using Intranets.com
For Sales Force Automation



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Centurion Vehicles, Inc. White Pigeon, MI

The leader in luxury conversion vehicles improved its sales effectiveness by using Intranets.com as a sales force automation tool.

Customer Business Profile

Centurion Vehicles, Inc. is the leading U.S. manufacturer of luxury conversion vehicles. They take standard vans, SUVs and pickup trucks and turn them into feature-rich, high-quality vehicles with all the comforts of home -- and more. Centurion owns many of the best-known brands in the market, including Cobra, Advantage, Rockwood and the oldest brand in the van conversion field, Starcraft.

The Challenge: Sharing Information with the Field

As Centurion's business expanded, maintaining a high level of communication with a growing field sales force became difficult. According to Paul Campbell, vice president of marketing for the Michigan-based firm, the company needed a better way to stay in touch with its field sales staff and a secure method to quickly distribute confidential information so that only employees could see it. Campbell did research on the technologies available to meet the company's needs and he selected an intranet from Intranets.com, the world's largest provider of Web-based intranets.

Centurion currently has two intranets in operation, the first is for the Starcraft brand, which has its own sales force, identity, pricing and specifications; the second covers its other brands. Campbell manages both sites. "All of our sales people are on the road three to five days out of every week, so they don't see the home office very often," said Campbell. Because of their heavy travel schedules the Centurion sales teams make good use of the intranets' documentsharing capabilities. "The intranets give our people a fast, easy way to get order forms, pricing, product descriptions and other important information while they are away from the office," he said.

Improving Communications Between Sales and Marketing

The sales and marketing departments are the heaviest users of Centurion's intranets. "As the head of marketing, a big part of my job is to make sure that the sales forces know what's going on in marketing and what we're doing to support them with product literature, our Web site, strategic plans and other important materials," said Campbell. The intranets provide an easy way to share this type of information as well as all of our sales materials."

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Marketing,
Centurion Vehicles, Inc.



He adds that while sales and marketing are the primary users, managers from other departments have become members of one or both sites to help them “stay in the loop,” as he puts it.

Must-see Information

With a field sales force that is often anywhere but in the office, Centurion relies on its intranets to deliver a wide variety of information to its sales reps and other employees. In fact, the intranets have become the official repository of all key announcements.

“We are developing the mind-set that if it is posted on the intranet, we consider everyone to have been properly notified,” explained Campbell. “Sales people can no longer use the excuse that they didn’t get the message, or didn’t see the fax. If it’s posted, they’re responsible for it. It’s a great way to distribute all types of documents and announcements.”

Campbell believes that the company’s sales force is quickly adapting to the intranet and welcomes the benefits it delivers to them.

“Since sales people know they’re responsible for seeing all of the information that’s on our intranets, we know that everyone visits the site at least once a day. Many of our people adopted the technology immediately, and are avid users. It has become an integral part of their work. Sales people all around the world went through similar learning patterns when they first fired up a fax machine, first booted a laptop computer, first bought a cell phone, and first logged on the Internet, but all of those technologies have become essential to increasing sales effectiveness and so have our intranets.”

Reducing Paperwork and Increasing Productivity

Because of the customized nature of Centurion’s work, its order system has always been paperwork-driven and subject to constant revision. Until they launched their intranets, placing and revising orders was an extremely paper-intensive, time-consuming process. Now, printing and e-mailing order forms and specifications has become the most used feature on the company’s intranets.

“Before we had our intranets, we distributed most of our forms and other documents by fax and overnight mail. This resulted in a tremendous number of phone calls to our overworked sales coordinator. All too often she received calls from the field such as:

‘Rebecca, could you fax me a new order form for this van or that SUV? I’m on the road and don’t have a clean one.’ But now that we’ve got everyone working on an intranet, our field sales representatives are more productive, our sales coordinator can spend time on more important tasks and everyone is much happier. Our intranet truly has made a big improvement in how we work at Centurion,” Campbell said.

Saving Time and Money

The benefit from sharing documents goes far beyond increasing employee productivity. Campbell says that Centurion’s intranets deliver a clear-cut financial benefit to the company.

“Thanks to our intranets, we have virtually eliminated the cost and time invested in printing order forms. Given the nature of our business, we were constantly revising documents. That meant a lot of printed copies quickly became obsolete and had to be thrown away, which wasted a great deal of money. The ability to distribute color documents via the intranets has also reduced our dependence on short-run color printing and color copying, which represents a substantial cost savings.”



One unexpected but interesting benefit to the company's introduction of intranets is that the technology has become popular with the members not only to keep on top of business matters, but to manage their personal lives as well.

"Our Intranets.com home page gives each user a handy set of management tools, including the day planner, the expense report and the task scheduler. These are a big help on the job and some of our people have expanded their use of these tools to keep track of their personal tasks and appointments, which is an added bonus," he said.

Another application that gets heavy use at Centurion is the ability to track expenses, so field sales people can quickly file forms and get reimbursed for their out-of-pocket expenses. Campbell says that feature is extremely popular with the sales force because it replaces hand-written notes and back-of-the-envelope calculations. And that popularity now extends to the people who process those expense forms.

"It took a little lobbying here at the home office to have the accounting department accept the online expense report form, but they are used to it now and it works well for everyone involved."

E-mailing Made Easy

With its sales people on the road so much of the time, communicating by e-mail was a particular challenge. Instead of being able to use a technology designed to facilitate fast communication, the hassles of remotely accessing the company's e-mail system created problems and slowed the flow of important information.

Since they can access their intranets from any Web-connected PC, Centurion's sales force takes full advantage of the e-mail capabilities of their intranets. Working from home, a hotel room or even a customer's office, Campbell says that sales reps now have a much simpler way to communicate via e-mail, which has helped improve the overall level of communication and collaboration within the sales force and between sales and marketing.

"It also provides them with a uniform set of e-mail addresses so regardless of where they are, it's easy for our reps to send messages to customers, suppliers and others from their Centurion or Starcraft address as opposed to a personal e-mail account. That helps enhance the overall level of professionalism and brand identity we are able to convey to the outside world," added Campbell.

Easy Set-up and Management

One of the key reasons that Centurion Vehicles chose the Intranets.com solution is that it operates on the application service provider (ASP) model. Intranets.com hosts all sites and the company performs all maintenance, upgrades and security, enabling customers to focus on their jobs, not on upkeep of their intranet site. Since Centurion doesn't have an in-house IT department, when Campbell decided to champion the use of intranets, it was his responsibility to set up the sites and populate them with materials. "I was looking for a quick, simple, inexpensive solution with a minimum of technical commitment on my end. With Intranets.com, set up was very fast and we were able to start using it right away."

Now that Centurion has revolutionized the way its sales force communicates and accesses important information, can Campbell imagine ever working without an intranet? "I can imagine it, but I don't want to. Our intranets are here to stay!"

