



Microsoft Virtual Earth Platform Customer Solution Case Study



Real Estate Leader Boosts Customer Appeal with Enhanced Online Mapping Technology

Overview

Country or Region: United States

Industry: Real Estate

Customer Profile

In operation since 1906, Coldwell Banker is a world leader in residential and commercial real estate. The company has 123,700 affiliated sales associates worldwide.

Business Situation

Coldwell Banker found the functionality of its legacy online-mapping solution limited. The solution could not show properties in a rich context, and map navigation and search were difficult.

Solution

Coldwell Banker deployed online mapping based on Microsoft® Virtual Earth™, including the ability to show surrounding amenities in context and a more intuitive approach to viewing and searching.

Benefits

- A 300 percent rise in map usage
- Enhanced reputation as an innovator
- Significant savings in maintenance
- Stronger collaboration with affiliates
- Greater competitive standing

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Helen Galasso, Vice President of Interactive Marketing, Coldwell Banker

In 2005, Coldwell Banker, a leader in using the Internet to sell homes, needed a more innovative approach to online mapping. Its legacy mapping solution could help consumers see a property's location, but the system was awkward to navigate and provided limited information in regard to surrounding amenities like schools and businesses. After an intensive search for cutting-edge mapping technologies, Coldwell Banker deployed a more powerful and intuitive online solution based on the Microsoft® Virtual Earth™ platform. The flexible and detailed property-search options in the solution's user interface have helped boost customer usage of the mapping features on the company's primary Web site by 300 percent and are enabling Coldwell Banker to extend its reputation as an industry innovator.

Microsoft

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Anna Visioli, Senior Manager for Interactive Marketing, Coldwell Banker

Situation

Coldwell Banker is one of the world’s largest residential real estate brokerage franchisors, with 3,800 franchise and company-owned offices in the United States, Canada, and 29 other countries. Its parent company is Realty Corporation, whose other subsidiaries include Century 21, ERA, Sotheby’s International Realty, NRT, Cactus Corporation, and Title Resource Group.

Coldwell Banker has held a prominent presence on the Internet since 1996 and, since the early 2000s, operates three main sites: coldwellbanker.com (for buyers of residential properties), coldwellbankerpreviews.com (for buyers of luxury residential properties), and coldwellbankerworks.com (for the company’s sales associates).

In 2005, company executives recognized the potential benefit of improving the mapping capabilities on the company’s Web sites. Specifically, the executives wanted to present properties in the larger context of neighborhoods and other surroundings, and to make the overall online mapping experience more intuitive for customers.

Ben Phillips, Vice President of New Product Development at Realty Corporation, puts it this way: “Online mapping had great potential to appeal to consumers seeking a home in another city or neighborhood—consumers who need to see properties in the context of neighboring schools, shopping, businesses, and so forth—but the technology wasn’t living up to that potential,” he says. “Instead, users had to search for such information in text form, often having to use menus and dialog boxes that required starting from scratch every time a search was changed.”

Solution

Phillips and other executives at Coldwell Banker and Realty decided to re-create the

user’s experience of searching for property online at Coldwell Banker Web sites by developing an entirely new solution. The executives were looking for a technology that would provide users with 3D viewing, virtual flyovers and data overlay. They evaluated mapping products offered by vendors ranging from Google Maps to little-known start-ups before deciding to deploy Microsoft® Virtual Earth™ mapping software.

Phillips says the selection of Virtual Earth was motivated by three factors above all: the product’s upfront capabilities; the deep enterprise experience and enterprise-level support and services offerings that Microsoft alone, among all the vendors evaluated, could provide for an online mapping product; and the widespread use of Microsoft products throughout both Coldwell Banker and Realty.

The executives were especially pleased with the completeness and ease of use they found in Virtual Earth. “We liked the way it enables users to view street maps or satellite photos with architectural details and landscape features, including schools, churches, hospitals, parks, retail establishments and other amenities surrounding a given property,” Phillips says. “We also liked the development toolkit that could evolve with the Coldwell Banker infrastructure and provide a platform for solutions that could be distributed across the different sites while enabling each site to differentiate itself. Yet another plus was that Virtual Earth had no need for any application to be downloaded to a user’s client machine.”

As for the support and services environment, Phillips says it was vital to work with a vendor that understood how to support a large company like Coldwell Banker and its parent company, Realty Corporation. This was particularly important because Realty had needed a larger-scale approach for online

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Charlie Young, Senior Vice President of Marketing, Coldwell Banker

mapping on a number of its Web sites, even before it decided to address the content and usage issues specific to Coldwell Banker.

“It all came down to sustainability,” Phillips says. “We needed not just a vendor with the technology to support updates and optimizations, but also a partner, a company that could provide us the business rules, flexibility, and autonomy we needed for successfully managing multiple brands. We needed a company that understood how to work with major IT organizations and that would be there with the necessary capital, talent, and commitment over the long haul. The way Microsoft addressed contingency issues and risks, as well as the various available engagement options, made it clear that they did and they would.”

Benefits

By mid-2006, Realogy had deployed Virtual Earth mapping to the main customer-facing Web site, www.coldwellbanker.com. The solution includes capabilities from third-party software provided by Infusion Development and Onboard.

Increased Map Use by Web-Site Visitors

According to Helen Galasso, Vice President of Interactive Marketing at Coldwell Banker, consumers visiting the Coldwell Banker site have far more information than before and a much easier way of getting to that information. “With Virtual Earth-based online mapping, buyers can visualize properties in a multidimensional way in the context of nearby schools, parks, churches, restaurants, and other amenities,” she explains. “The maps are also more intuitive to operate, enabling users to zoom, pan, and access different views, including a bird’s eye view, in a seamless way. And there’s less need than before to use menus and dialog boxes for entering new search information.”

As a result, map access is up, according to Anna Visioli, Senior Manager for Interactive Marketing at Coldwell Banker. “Since deployment of Virtual Earth mapping at ColdwellBanker.com, the proportion of site visitors who choose to use the online mapping option has risen by 300 percent,” she says. “It’s no wonder, with the richer and easier user experience that Virtual Earth provides.”

Enhanced Reputation as an Industry Innovator

The new solution has enhanced Coldwell Banker’s reputation as a pioneer in Web-based technology. “In the mid-1990s, we were first in the real estate industry to offer a Web site, and now we are first to offer a truly intuitive way of presenting map-based information on residential properties,” Galasso says. “We have even moved our maps from the sidelines of our site to front and center, making them the first impression that many visitors have of Coldwell Banker and building on our reputation as an innovator.”

Galasso’s colleagues agree. “Innovation is one of the driving forces within the organization, the way we show not only consumers but also competitors that we intend to remain ahead of the curve,” says Visioli. Adds Charlie Young, Senior Vice President of Marketing at Coldwell Banker, “Online mapping is no longer a differentiator in the real estate space, but what we are doing with it really makes us stand out.” In recognition of its leadership in innovation, Coldwell Banker recently received a 2007 Inman News Innovator Award in the brokerage/franchise category.

Flexibility with Low Maintenance Costs

According to Visioli, the new online mapping solution is also helping Coldwell Banker energize its internal stakeholders and affiliates. “Virtual Earth puts us in a whole

“Even having implemented just a fraction of the Virtual Earth capabilities, we are saving over a quarter of a million dollars in mapping costs and software maintenance.”

Ben Phillips, Vice President of New Product Development, Realogy Corporation

new league of mapping solutions,” she says. “Our marketing professionals are rethinking the Web-search experience. Our developers are looking at new ways to present and integrate data. We are far more able than before to incorporate ideas from our affiliates across the United States and Canada, ideas that would help them work more successfully with local buyers.”

When it comes time for such enhancements, internal developers are taking advantage of not only the technology but also the support provided by Microsoft. “For a competitive edge, we can deliver updates and enhancements much faster than in the past,” Phillips reports. “That’s the advantage of deploying a truly enterprise-level solution, through a partner [like Microsoft] that understands how to work with a large enterprise.”

Another advantage of deploying an enterprise-level online mapping solution is cost. “Even having implemented just a fraction of the Virtual Earth capabilities, we are saving hundreds of thousands of dollars in maintenance as compared to what we probably would be spending to support a ‘free’ technology alternative,” Phillips says. “That helps us competitively, too.”

An Extendible, Competitive Solution

In future deployment plans, Phillips and his colleagues at Realogy Corporation are considering enhancing the search experience for buyers of commercial properties, perhaps starting with Coldwell Banker Commercial, another Realogy subsidiary. “Because the Virtual Earth platform has further positioned Coldwell Banker as a leader in online mapping and rendering search results for homebuyers, the platform is ideal for doing the same thing for buyers of commercial properties,” he adds.

Other ideas are to expand the mapping enhancements to Coldwell Banker properties offered beyond the United States and Canada; to incorporate photographic images of properties into the map view; and to integrate real-time data, such as traffic information at a given time of day, into the search engine. All of which make up still more reasons that Coldwell Banker and Realogy executives are glad they chose Microsoft Virtual Earth for their online mapping platform.

“Working with a company like Microsoft, with its vast offering of products and services, there’s enormous potential for integration and innovation in online mapping,” Young says. “For us, Microsoft Virtual Earth is the engine for continuing levels of innovation.”

For More Information

For more information about Microsoft products and services, call the Microsoft Sales Information Center at (800) 426-9400. In Canada, call the Microsoft Canada Information Centre at (877) 568-2495. Customers who are deaf or hard-of-hearing can reach Microsoft text telephone (TTY/TDD) services at (800) 892-5234 in the United States or (905) 568-9641 in Canada. Outside the 50 United States and Canada, please contact your local Microsoft subsidiary. To access information using the World Wide Web, go to: www.microsoft.com

For more information about Infusion Development, visit the Web site at: www.infusion.com

For more information about Coldwell Banker, visit the Web site at: www.coldwellbanker.com

Microsoft Virtual Earth

The Virtual Earth platform is Microsoft's next generation mapping and location service. It combines the MapPoint Web Service with exciting new innovations around bird's eye, satellite and aerial imagery, dynamic map styles and enhanced local search. Using the Virtual Earth platform, companies and government organizations can create an immersive online mapping and search experience that enables their customers to easily discover, search, explore, share, and visualize business location data and locally relevant information. For developers, Virtual Earth supports a variety of programming environments and can be easily integrated into business applications, like customer relationship management and supply chain management.

For more information about Microsoft Virtual Earth, go to: www.microsoft.com/virtualearth

Software and Services

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