Dalhousie University

The strategic weight of the web

Top Canadian university adopts Adobe Experience Manager, to streamline and centralize web content authoring, promoting consistent and compelling experience across website

Located in Halifax, Nova Scotia, Dalhousie is a leading Canadian university offering more than 180 degree programs. The university has a student enrollment of nearly 17,000, a faculty of more than 1,000, and extensive research activities that attract more than $132 million in awards and grants each year. Dalhousie's web presence is one of the main ways the university engages with people on and off campus, delivering marketing, research, and administration information to prospects, students and their parents, and alumni.

Compelling, clear web communications are of particular importance for the university’s recruiters, who must attract students in the competitive higher education space. The quest is ever present to reach prospects through the media and channels that students prefer—the web, mobile, and social networks. At the same time, to strengthen the university’s reputation abroad, Dalhousie looks to attract students from countries around the globe.

Due to its strategic importance, the university’s website needed to deliver consistent branding and simple navigation. Yet the web presence evolved organically over the years, with IT staff, department heads, researchers, administrators, recruitment specialists, and more than 80 academic programs contributing and updating web content.

Departmental websites were often out of date and did not provide a coherent, high-quality user experience for online visitors. A major contributor to Dalhousie’s website challenges was the university’s existing centralized content management system (CMS). It did not meet the university’s performance standards, nor did it provide templates or a standard, up-to-date set of materials such as brand assets, images, and photographs.

"Many departments voiced the need for an easier way to publish and update web content—but we saw an even bigger opportunity to reinvent how the web is managed at Dalhousie," says Dwight Fischer, assistant vice president and chief information officer for Dalhousie. "Our web environment was in need of revitalization, new content management tools, and better alignment to institutional strategy."

Meeting constituents’ needs

The Dalhousie Web Revitalization Project kicked off in April 2009, headed by a core steering team of peers from Enrollment Management and Communications and Marketing. The university partnered with nonlinear digital to craft a new digital and governance strategy and to build a flexible, re-usable AEM implementation with a fresh, creative treatment.
Departments weighed in that, above all, they wanted a faster, easier way to communicate using their websites. They saw many opportunities—from special events to visits from executives—to engage and excite the university community. Often, however, timely promotion of events involved a lengthy, labor-intensive process.

Technical staff members within departments were concerned about the flexibility of the previous CMS. Across the university, IT professionals wanted to be able to create their own applications, display external content, or paste existing PHP, Java™, or other code, into existing online applications.

**Challenge**
- Communicating with current and prospective students using their preferred channels
- Transforming management of web content
- Maintaining a consistent online experience
- Empowering communicators to easily author and publish web content

**Solution**
Dalhousie University is using Adobe Marketing Cloud, including the Adobe Experience Manager solution, to deliver a brand-consistent, engaging online experience to all constituencies and recruit more effectively.

**Benefits**
- Revamped top-level pages, related to recruiting and enrollment management, that provide a rich, engaging web experience to prospective students
- Created a centrally managed web model that lets contributors focus on targeted web publishing tasks
- Combined consistent branding and user experience with fast, intuitive tool for entire university
- Achieved 24% year-over-year increase in visitors on admissions pages after improving user experience
- Began to incorporate social media and mobile capabilities for enhanced communication with prospects, students, and others

During the initial stages of the project, the university identified the need to attract and retain students as its highest priority. The first step in using the Adobe Experience Manager solution, part of Adobe Marketing Cloud, was to help ensure that the website’s top-level pages related to recruiting and enrollment management would provide content engaging enough to interest students in attending Dalhousie. Another requirement was to begin reorganizing the website navigation to group together associated topics, versus building the website to mirror the university’s organizational chart.

After evaluating alternative technologies, Dalhousie selected Adobe Experience Manager, including web content management and digital asset management capabilities, to provide a common set of tools and resources throughout the university so that staff could transform the website into a visitor-friendly experience. Adobe Experience Manager quickly became the cornerstone of the Web Revitalization Project, which resulted in a host of transformations. The university treated the web as a mature enterprise system and developed policy and practice to centralize its management. The project team established new publishing guidelines, policy, and governance procedures. Website structures designed around the organizational chart were abandoned so that services and information could be clustered in ways more sensible to web visitors such as prospects.

The upgraded websites that live on Adobe Experience Manager are already drawing more traffic and spurring visitors to spend more time on the site. Within the first four months of the Admissions department using Adobe Experience Manager to deliver new web content, the university saw a 24% increase in visitors when compared to the same period in the prior year. On landing pages designed to garner prospective students, the university is testing alternative versions and measuring impact including time spent on the site and page views. According to the university, the metrics are already showing a significant increase in the effectiveness of the website as a resource to attract and engage prospective students and retain first-year students.
Delivering brand consistency and ease of use
Adobe Experience Manager adoption is expanding throughout the university, with users taking advantage of the solution alongside Adobe Creative Suite® software, such as Adobe Photoshop®, Fireworks®, and Acrobat® Pro. Adobe Experience Manager is fast and easy to use, while offering process automation and centralized brand control to help ensure efficiency and consistency across the site. It also provides an enterprise system that everyone can use, as well as a platform for helping people at the university rethink how they communicate on the web to create a more compelling, interactive visitor experience.

Users contribute to websites that are maintained independently, but managed centrally, supporting the university’s philosophy of helping ensure branding and navigational consistency. The templates in Adobe Experience Manager form the basis of a preformatted, pre-searchable, navigable framework with standardized branding that lets communicators fill in content with speed and ease. Communicators can spend their energies and efforts on more meaningful, targeted work, and leave the care and management of templates and branding assets to a centralized resource.

University staff is excited about the speed and ease of publishing web content using Adobe Experience Manager. Throughout the university, they are adopting the solution on their own. For instance, the Library and Athletic departments have been early adopters whose sites now record high visitation levels, driven by intuitive navigation and rich content that mesh with the way young students are accustomed to interacting.

Fostering connections via social networks and mobile devices
As part of its strategy to reach prospective students, Dalhousie is in the process of implementing the social communities capability in Adobe Experience Manager to communicate globally with prospects, current students, and others through social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter. Dalhousie envisions enabling exchanges and conversations among students and recruiters or even among departments. The organization is also in the process of implementing mobile capabilities within Adobe Experience Manager to allow information access and communication across the multitude of devices available for accessing the mobile web. This option will keep students and other constituents more connected with topical news and updates.
"Adobe Experience Manager quickly won the respect of everyone across the board. That’s rare in the world of technology. Now, we have a platform and framework that gives us a growth path to the future and a way to communicate consistently, in ways that truly engage the younger generation we need to reach."

Dwight Fischer
Assistant vice president and chief information officer, Dalhousie University

For Dalhousie, Adobe Experience Manager has enabled better brand control, look and feel and navigation consistency, and more timely delivery of content. It is also helping the university start to accrue cost savings because distributed departments no longer have to maintain their own solutions for web content management and publishing. IT professionals enjoy the flexibility of being able to create their own applications, display external content, or use existing code, because Adobe Experience Manager offers a technology-agnostic platform. Overall, a transformation has occurred that has brought the website from an ad hoc creation to one imbued with leadership and strong foundational technologies, and this had a positive impact on innovation, productivity, and website quality.

"Adobe Experience Manager quickly won the respect of everyone across the board. That’s rare in the world of technology," says Fischer. "Now, we have a platform and framework that gives us a growth path to the future and a way to communicate consistently, in ways that truly engage the younger generation we need to reach. And, we have transformational web governance models that provide a foundation for a new way of doing business and managing the web."

Toolkit
Adobe Marketing Cloud, including the Adobe Experience Manager solution. Capabilities used include:
- Web content management
- Digital asset management

For more information