



Virtualised solution

set to provide Schuh with room to grow

Case Study

CLIENT PROFILE

Schuh Limited has experienced significant growth since opening its first store in Edinburgh in 1981. Today, it has over 56 stand-alone retail sites across the UK and Ireland, and 15 concessions.

Not only has Schuh experienced commercial success, it has attracted accolades and awards from industry-watchers and business commentators alike. These include winning the Best Private Company in Scotland category in the Scottish Business Awards.

Schuh's success is based on a simple but powerful philosophy. It aims to offer the widest choice of aspirational but accessible fashion footwear brands and styles, with excellent customer service.

ONLINE PRESENCE GOES FROM STRENGTH TO STRENGTH

While it's difficult to pin down the 'typical' Schuh customer with the usual demographics, he or she undoubtedly has a passion for fashion footwear and a readiness to experiment with new ideas. Schuh responds with its own innovative approach to business. The best part of a decade ago, against the backdrop of the dotcom crash, the company took the decision to replace its static website presence with an eCommerce operation, to complement its existing store network - a bold move at the time.

Claire Steyert, Internet Development Manager, explains, "Initially, we looked at hosting the website servers ourselves as most of the systems were in house. But given the volume of infrastructure and the requirement for 24-hour support, outsourcing appeared the more secure and cost-effective route. Having embarked on this path, we then needed to find a reliable partner for dedicated server hosting that could scale up as our online business grew."

She describes the decision-making process, "We had a clear specification for the support we needed. Once you rely on an eCommerce solution, it has to work without fail; so we were naturally concerned about levels of reliability and speed of response to any issues. In addition, we needed a solution that could anticipate and respond to rapid growth, both in terms of more machines and bandwidth. Cost was obviously a criterion, too, although it wasn't the main criterion as fortunately we had a reasonable budget. With all the proposals in front of us, we chose TDM Group as being the most suitable, having taken soundings on their track record for service and reliability with their existing customers."

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Claire Steyert
Internet Development Manager
Schuh





Over the ensuing years, outsourcing has freed time within the business and Schuh has benefited from high service quality. Claire reports, "Having an outsourced solution from TDM Group enables us to focus our energies on running a successful eCommerce operation. To do this, we absolutely must have a website which works without problem. There haven't been many issues, but if something does come up, the TDM Group support team responds very quickly, even at the weekend. The service is very reliable and they are always friendly and helpful. I've been very impressed."

Despite the recession, Schuh has recently posted its best ever financial results. The online arm of the business has performed particularly well, reaching as it does an international customer base. The website has proved a great draw among the target audience and this has been recognised within the industry: Schuh was a finalist in the More Fashion Awards in the Most Addictive Online Shopping Site category and a winner in both Best Multichannel Retailer category in the Drapers Etail Awards, and Etailer of the Year in the Drapers Footwear Awards.

A CHANGE IN DIRECTION FOR SCHUH'S IT STRATEGY

From the original single server, the hosting solution provided by TDM Group has evolved in line with Schuh's growth. The business has been able to upgrade whenever necessary by adding more servers. However, earlier this year, Schuh decided to steer a different course in asking TDM Group's help to create a virtualised environment to complement its physical environment.

There are excellent business reasons for virtualisation, according to Claire, "As a growing online business, we need to be able to scale up rapidly as conditions change. In addition, our business has seasonal fluctuations and a virtualised environment will give us increased flexibility. We're in the process of testing the virtual server architecture being provided by TDM Group. This will allow us to add another machine very quickly, as and when needed. So, for example, having to plan months ahead to cope with increased demand at Christmas will become a thing of the past."

Schuh has commissioned a mid-range VMware infrastructure, with HP hardware running all the virtual machines and VMware vCenter management tools, along with NetApp storage. While the company has already been using two TDM Group data centres in London, it will be adding an extra level of resilience as resources can be rapidly reassigned across the virtualised environment. Furthermore, NetApp SnapRestore® software will recover data almost instantaneously.

Although cost wasn't the overriding factor, having fewer physical servers will bring clear savings. Being able to perform tests on cloned virtual machines will be a further advantage, as this will not impact the live virtual environment.

Once again, Claire praises the support received from TDM Group, "As always, they are being very supportive in helping us to create a virtualised environment. We're new to virtualisation and TDM Group visited us at our Livingston office to go through the potential benefits and explain what it would involve. It's another example of how they've been a great partner over the years. We're very happy with the relationship. No one can match TDM Group for reliability and willingness to support us in trying new things."

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