



BC Ferries helps commuters save time with Virtual Earth™

Overview

Country: Canada

Industry: Transportation

Customer Profile

BC Ferries is one of the largest ferry services in the world. Annually, BC Ferries' 38 vessels carry 22 million passengers to 47 ports-of-call along the west coast of British Columbia.

Business Situation

To enhance customer service, BC Ferries wanted to visually track its vessels en route to terminals through a mapping application.

Solution

BC Ferries chose Microsoft Virtual Earth™ mapping software to provide customers with better travel-planning information both online and within its terminals.

Benefits

- Improved customer service
- High-quality imagery
- Generated excitement
- Stable service
- Flexibility to expand

“Virtual Earth was a natural choice for us because it updates automatically, requiring little effort on our side. Essentially, it operates in the background.”

Paul Curtis, Manager of Web Services, BC Ferries

As British Columbia's primary ferry service, BC Ferries maintains a constant flow of goods and services. Each year the company transports 22 million residents and tourists to 47 ports-of-call. Finding ways to continuously improve customer service is a priority. The company recently decided to develop a mapping tool that would enable customers to track vessel locations both online and within its terminals. Working with Microsoft® Partner AppLocation, BC Ferries chose Microsoft Virtual Earth™ mapping software to create the application. Virtual Earth maps help customers spend less time waiting at terminals and provides them with updated vessel arrival and departure information.

Situation

Located along the west coast of British Columbia, BC Ferries is one of the largest marine transportation systems in the world. Since 1960, BC Ferries has grown from a two-vessel, two-terminal operation to a current total of 38 vessels and 47 ports-of-call. As the primary coastal ferry service in the province, BC Ferries also plays a critical role in the region's economy. The company maintains a constant flow of goods and services, links families and friends and attracts tourists to local travel destinations.

BC Ferries transports 22 million passengers annually and actively seeks ways to enhance the customer experience. Responding to consumer feedback, BC Ferries wanted to deploy a mapping tool to show customers exactly where vessels were en route to terminals. Previously, the company was only providing scheduled departure and arrival times - times that were subject to delays based on weather or other unforeseeable circumstances. Using maps, BC Ferries would be able to show the same data visually and provide a more accurate scheduling system that would help customers save time and stay updated on vessel arrival and departure information.

"We wanted the maps to be at our customers' fingertips to keep them better informed when using our services," says Paul Curtis, Manager of Web Services for BC Ferries. "We wanted passengers and drivers to arrive at the terminals exactly when they needed to be there and encourage people to explore our terminals freely without fear of missing their voyage."

The challenge BC Ferries faced was to find a reliable mapping application that would provide frequently updated images of its vessels. The company also needed to ensure the tool could be integrated into its existing

systems, and easily modified to reflect change and growth.

Solution

BC Ferries hired Microsoft® Partner, AppLocation to deliver the mapping feature. Working with AppLocation, BC Ferries chose Microsoft Virtual Earth and AppLocation's MobileFusion platform as it provides seamless integration of satellite, cellular and VHF networks along with tremendous flexibility to expand mapping and other services very quickly.

After evaluating other options, including Google Maps, AppLocation recommended Virtual Earth because it could be easily installed and maintained. "We needed a stable program that would continually track our vessels, but we didn't want it to tax our energy day-to-day," says Curtis. "Virtual Earth was a natural choice for us because it updates automatically, requiring little effort on our side. Essentially, it operates in the background."

Given that BC Ferries business applications reside on the operates on Windows Server® operating system, integrating Virtual Earth with its existing IT resources and AIS data was simple. Within one week, AppLocation set up the mapping service and adjusted the application to meet BC Ferries' needs. Now, the Virtual Earth maps are automated and updated every two minutes to provide customers with the most current vessel locations.

Since it was deployed two years ago, passenger feedback has been positive and customer demand for the tool continues to grow. BC Ferries' employees have also benefited from Virtual Earth as it has helped reduce the volume of calls to its customer service centre.

“A lot of the tool’s success stems from the stability of Virtual Earth,” says Kevin Buckham, CTO, AppLocation. “It would be problematic to have a service that frequently goes down because passengers rely on it for their travel plans.”

Benefits

While designed to provide customers with useful travel information, Virtual Earth also provides additional value to people at BC Ferries. With Virtual Earth, the company has added high-quality imagery to its Web presence and terminals. The flexibility of Virtual Earth means BC Ferries can easily extend the service to other routes and projects. The software is also stable, automated and frequently updated, enabling staff to focus on other operations.

Enhanced Customer Service

BC Ferries now provides Virtual Earth maps on its Web site to help customers better manage their time before arriving or picking someone up at a terminal. At terminals, passengers use the maps to track vessels and to identify when to prepare for boarding. BC Ferries also uses Virtual Earth to cater to the needs of both urban and rural passengers.

“Commuters on major urban routes, like those to Victoria and Vancouver, use the maps to get more out of their work day and spend less time at the terminal,” says Curtis. “The maps also benefit people using our northern routes where weather conditions are more likely to cause delays.”

Generates Excitement

Virtual Earth has also helped BC Ferries create unique public relations and marketing opportunities for BC Ferries. While moving its newly acquired vessels from Germany to British Columbia, BC Ferries encouraged passengers and media to log onto the company Web site and follow the voyages

across the Atlantic Ocean, through the Panama Canal and to the vessels’ final destination.

“The maps generated a lot of excitement as we moved our vessels home,” says Curtis. “Virtual Earth gave us the unique ability to let people watch the journey themselves, rather than us just telling them about it.”

Opportunities to Expand Service

As a growing business, BC Ferries cites the ability to easily modify the mapping service as an asset. Since Virtual Earth was implemented, BC Ferries successfully expanded the service to include its northern, more remote routes. The company will continue to add more routes to keep up with customer demand.

“Virtual Earth has demonstrated its scalability and flexibility because we were able to easily add new routes to the interface,” says Curtis. “Right now we’re looking at using the technology at an even deeper level for future projects.”

For More Information

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For more information about AppLocation Systems Inc. products and services, call (250)-220-7122 or visit the Web site at: www.AppLocation.net

For more information about BC Ferries services, call 1-888-BC FERRY or visit the Web site at: www.bcferries.bc.ca

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.NET is integrated across Microsoft products and services, providing the ability to quickly build, deploy, manage, and use connected, secure solutions with Web services. These solutions provide agile business integration and the promise of information anytime, anywhere, on any device.

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