PaintShop® Pro

Overview

hitched.co.uk

Name: Darren Noel, Commercial Director
Company: Hitched.co.uk
Industry: Wedding planning
Location: Camberley, UK
Product: Corel® PaintShop® Pro

Darren Noel (left) and Dean Yardley, directors of top UK wedding website www.hitched.co.uk.

Planning for the big day

It was another busy day for Dean Yardley and Darren Noel, two technicians from British Airways. On one day in 1997, they had a load of work to get out of the way – and one of them was also trying to plan his fast-approaching wedding, which added to the stress. While working through a pile of projects, Dean, the groom-to-be, commented on the difficulty of finding out about wedding venues. Flipping through newspaper ads and the yellow pages, talking to friends and relatives… it was all so time-consuming. He commented that it would be so much easier if there were a centralised resource where couples could review which venues were available in which location, and compare their prices and services.

That was a lightbulb moment for Dean. After researching on the fledgling internet, as it was in 1996, he realised they were face-to-face with a gap in the market – and a very interesting business opportunity.

Hitched.co.uk is born

Learning as they went along, Dean and Darren read up on the project, bought a domain name – **www.hitched.co.uk** – and created a small website. In 1997, without giving up their day jobs at British Airways, they launched hitched.co.uk.

Shortly afterwards, they called the H.M. Stationery Office and, for the princely sum of £7.50, acquired a list of every licensed event venue in Britain. After the laborious task of manually copying 3,000 names, addresses, phone numbers and the odd email address into Excel, the result was the first online wedding venue database in the UK.

Some 12 months later, after rather lean success in selling advertisement space to venues, Dean received an interesting call. He recalls: "To my amazement, it was the ad agency for the Debenhams department store. They wanted to book ads on the site for 3 months, which then became 6 and ultimately 18 months!" That order really kicked off the site and gave the business more visibility. At this point, Darren had moved on from British Airways and began to run the hitched.co.uk website full time. "More and more venues booked ads with us, which was great. But this was before the boom in digital

cameras, so they sent us their photos on paper," says Darren Noel. "I'd scan them and put them on the site, but some of them didn't look that attractive. So I had a look on the web to see if there was any photo shareware to help me optimise them."

Corel® PaintShop® Pro to the rescue

"We chose Corel's PaintShop® Pro, which was a downloadable shareware program at the time," says Darren Noel. "I found it really easy to use and it gave the venues' photos that professional touch that made all the difference." The advertising


Wedding Venue - Belvoir Castle

Belvoir Castle – just one of the dream wedding venues advertised on hitched.co.uk.

customers liked the result, and as most of them didn't yet have a website of their own, Darren Noel developed the business by selling each venue a mini-site, hosted on the hitched.co.uk servers. They supplied a description of their venue, some bullet points about their services, and three or four photos. Over time, as more and more companies and venues began to advertise with them, the team at hitched grew and the use of Corel® PaintShop® Pro increased dramatically. Hitched used the shareware version of Corel® PaintShop® Pro for some time and moved up to more current versions as they were released. "It's always had that same ease of use as the shareware version, but with more features added," notes Darren Noel.

Keeping pace as the company grows

By this time, the company was going from strength to strength and staffing numbers at the small office in Surrey were increasing. Darren and Dean expanded the site beyond venues to include wedding dresses, suits, ideas for speeches and much more, as well as the big hit of the site – a discussion forum. Prospective brides and grooms could log in and ask questions or share tips and ideas with other users. "The forum was clearly really useful to the site's users while driving up traffic too, which was an ideal selling point for our advertising customers," comments Noel. "At one point, 50% of the site's visitors used the forum. Today the percentage is much, much lower, but not because the forum traffic has dropped, it's simply that the rest of the site is so informative and useful, and there is so much content available." Over the years, the site has become the top wedding-related site in the UK, with a million visitors and 8-9 million page views per month. It also contains advertising and information for some 15,000 suppliers in the UK. Hitched has expanded beyond the UK, with a site, office and staff in Australia as well as localised wedding sites for Ireland, South Africa and Canada.

The company behind the site has grown too, with the Surrey based office housing about 20 staff and another 6-8 development staff based in various corners of the world. Darren Noel manages the commercial side of the business, while the editorial department creates content for the site. The design and development team is headed up by Dean Yardley, who has now joined the workforce full time at Hitched. He oversees the whole operation but also provides guidance and inspiration with regard to new tools and features on the UK's number one wedding website. These are now far in advance of any other website in the UK, and probably in the world. "Corel® PaintShop® Pro has kept pace with our growth and we're still really happy with it," says Noel. "The commercial and editorial teams at Hitched use it all the time. When new staff come in, they get the hang of it in no time – it only takes ten minutes to show them how to optimise photos."
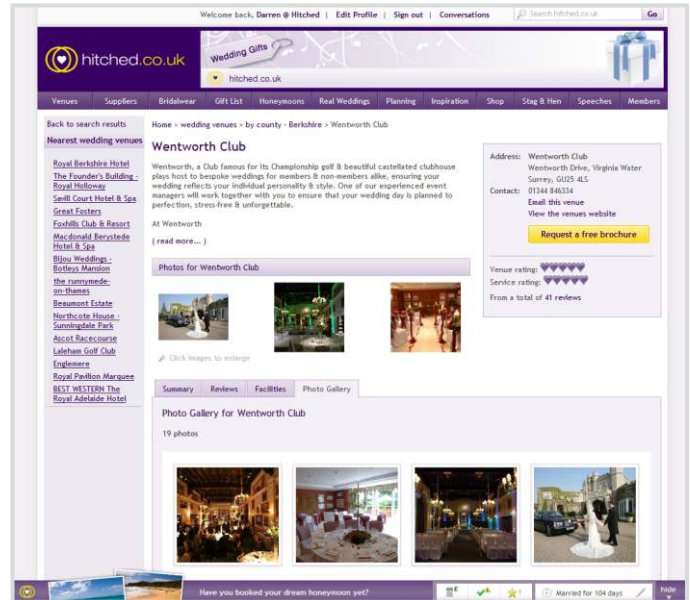
Couples are spoiled for choice with thousands of wedding venues and other services on hitched.co.uk.

Special effects popular with advertisers

Unlike the early days, when Hitched staff did all the work on the images and uploaded them, advertisers can now log in to a protected area of the site and upload their own photos. "Some of our customers optimise their own pictures, but there are still a significant number who don't have the time and prefer the results we get with Corel® PaintShop® Pro," says Noel. "They're very keen on the special effects – such as changing lighting to make it look more romantic or making a collage of several images. It doesn't take long to optimise the photos and the customer can see them on the site five or ten minutes after emailing them to us."

Next steps

Hitched has now begun to upgrade its Corel® PaintShop® Pro licences to Version X5 to ensure full compatibility with the company's 64-bit Windows® 7 systems. While the design department uses a more complex solution, the commercial and editorial teams will remain loyal to Corel® PaintShop® Pro. "We have basically used Corel® PaintShop® Pro to build hitched.co.uk into the UK's number one wedding website," says Darren Noel. "I would estimate that about 80% of the images on the site have been edited using Corel® PaintShop® Pro. It has always been exceptionally flexible and useful. Like a couple in a happy marriage, Corel® PaintShop® Pro and Hitched will stick together!"