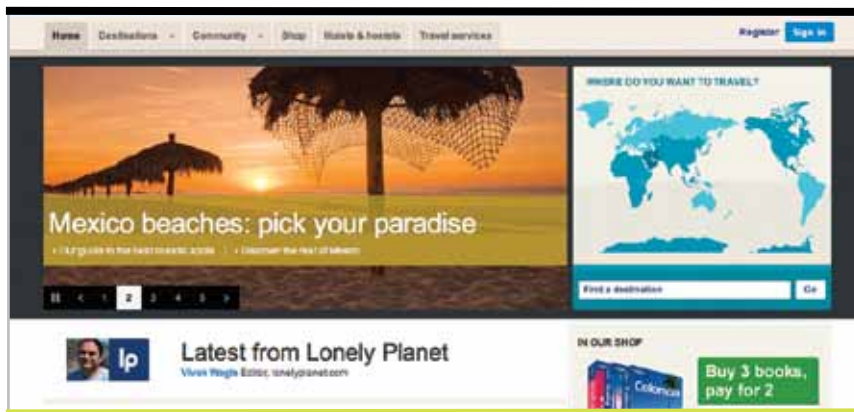


Lonely Planet going digital

Lonely Planet had a vision. To evolve from a print-based business to one that can also take full advantage of digital opportunities. ThoughtWorks paired with Lonely Planet to make the company's vast library of travel content available online and connect it with powerful social features. With the site live and winning awards, Lonely Planet are now busy monetizing their content through new platforms and services.



Australia-based Lonely Planet has the biggest selling guidebook series in the world – nearly

100 million guides have been sold since the company was founded by Tony and Maureen Wheeler in the early 1970s. Travel publishing is a competitive marketplace and Lonely Planet has succeeded against other brands including Rough Guides and Fodor's. Renowned for their candid destination commentaries, Lonely Planet travel guides have been "telling it like it is" for more than three decades. But growth has stalled in the increasingly fragmented travel book market, with roughly the same volume of guidebooks selling now as ten years ago. Travelers are turning to online services instead.

Lonely Planet had a website with a loyal following, but not the immense popularity of the guidebooks themselves. It lacked features like user reviews and trip planning that competitors such as TripAdvisor had been gaining traction with, and it contained just a fraction of the content of the guidebooks.

Highlights

- ThoughtWorks was a key contributor to transforming Lonely Planet into a digital media enterprise.
- Lonely Planet staff have embedded Agile development practices, improving their delivery capability for the long term.
- ThoughtWorks helped Lonely Planet create the new XML APIs which give external developers the ability to harness content.
- ThoughtWorks also contributed the ability to license content to third parties. Nokia has already signed up for a global license.
- Leadership and advice from ThoughtWorks helped Lonely Planet to change its existing site architecture to a simpler, more efficient one.
- The Trip Planner, a major feature, was built from scratch to deployment in five weeks.
- The ThoughtWorks team worked alongside Lonely Planet staff, mentoring in addition to delivery responsibilities.

Technology

Java / Ruby on Rails (JRuby)
PHP (Drupal Content Management System)



Lonely Planet going digital



The purchase of a majority stake in Lonely Planet by BBC Worldwide (BBCWW) in 2007 ratcheted up the impetus to compete online and derive greater returns from the guidebook content and iconic Lonely Planet brand name. BBCWW brought digital expertise as well as funding, and in turn expected a lot from Lonely Planet's own digital delivery teams. A team began work with a design studio in the UK for a re-launched Lonely Planet site.

A new business model – but how to get from here to there?

What gradually emerged was a concept for an entirely new way of doing business, rather than just upgrades to the website. All book content would be accessible online; user communities would allow sharing of personal travel stories and experiences; digital images and video content would be mined from Lonely Planet and BBC services' existing massive collections and tagged intelligently in order to be offered up seamlessly to both consumers and other businesses. But the technical challenges were daunting. How to accomplish all this – and in as short a time as possible?

Lonely Planet was using some Agile practices and wanted to expand their adoption. Lonely Planet and BBCWW leaders knew that the project and larger online team would require significant process change at multiple levels to be successful. Lonely Planet knew of ThoughtWorks' leadership in Agile. They engaged a small initial team to coach the Lonely Planet staff in Agile methods, and a program management expert to help guide the project.

As development got underway, ThoughtWorks paired with Lonely Planet project leaders to continually evaluate the work to be completed against the rate of actual progress. This was an immense real-time management task – the backend integration, print content migration engine, third-party links for bookings and the online store, the user interface full other feature set - had to be monitored and priorities balanced as the project progressed.



The organisation gets Agile

Agile practices were refined throughout Lonely Planet: from the engineering teams using continuous integration and test-driven development up through the program level with portfolio reviews.

Requirements were prioritised to make sure the items that would deliver the greatest value were worked first. Lonely Planet gained a clear view on scope that was absolutely needed to go live, which made developing a plan for not just launch release but subsequent regular releases possible. It was at times a winding road, with a few bumps, but Lonely Planet gradually made the transition to Agile.

ThoughtWorks advised reorganising project teams – which by now had grown to several times the original size – to break down functional boundaries that were getting in the way. Lonely Planet had teams working on pieces of the puzzle – content management, architecture/services and presentation layer – but none had the ability to deliver complete results for an end user. Changes were made gradually, but nearing the initial launch date all staff were working together on integrated requirements, fostering better communication and problem-solving because all the people needed to build and test a complete feature were working together. Overall build and test cycles sped up as the project progressed, one reason being the higher quality of the code being checked in as teams integrated more and more.

Working on the foundation while building the house

In this kind of project the underlying architecture has effects on not only the ability to handle traffic and to scale, it has a great bearing on developer productivity as well. ThoughtWorks consultants became concerned that the architecture for the website was excessively complex – making it difficult for the whole team to understand and implement and causing a slowdown in delivery. A senior ThoughtWorks architect assisted by reviewing the architecture and providing comparisons to similar scale projects delivered globally by ThoughtWorks.

Recommendations were made to remove unnecessary “moving parts” and staff worked together to implement the recommendations. The result is a lighter architecture that is well understood, faster to develop with, and easier to maintain in the long term. It made it possible to automate more of the build / test cycle and increasingly change developers over to a Test Driven Development (TDD) approach, raising code quality and increasing productivity down the line. This change was completed without loss of work already underway.

“ThoughtWorks was able to come in and help us quantify how big this effort truly was. If we saw that a team had more work than could be done in the timeframe available, ThoughtWorks helped us prioritise, focusing on value to the business and sorting through dependencies.”

Mark Andrew, Lonely Planet Program Manager
Lonely Planet/BBCWW program exec.

“The ThoughtWorks partnership has helped Lonely Planet achieve a major new website, a social networking platform and an open architecture, making sure we can be responsive and innovative as the market and our audiences' needs change.”

Nigel Dalton GM - IT

Obsessive focus

To combat requirements churn, a daily requirements review – the Triage Session – was instituted for the Launch Director, other key managers plus representatives from each discipline. Requirements were looked at and the most important work decided based on the key question – “Can we go live without it?”

What had started out as an Agile coaching engagement gradually became critical Agile project management assistance, technical consulting, and development responsibility for key elements of the website. ThoughtWorks made vital contributions to the relaunched site, while helping Lonely Planet overhaul the architecture and improve the quality and productivity of development processes long-term.

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Future unlimited

The new site launched in November 2008. US visits to the site have grown by 22% and UK visits by 28% concrete indicators of the inroads being made despite the global slump in the travel market occasioned by the global financial crisis. Now firing at full strength in process, organisation and technology, Lonely Planet's transformation to a business that embraces both traditional publishing and the digital media business model is well underway.

The project is considered by BBCWW Directors as the most significant technology delivery in 2008. Award nominations including the Gourmet Traveler website of the year 2009 have been garnered, and the site has won the Webby for best Travel Site as well as Australia's iAward for technology innovation in the Tourism and Hospitality category.

The digital transformation tools put in place now enable Lonely Planet to repurpose and serve up content on its platform to third parties to generate new revenue streams. Lonely Planet's travel maps appear on Nokia mobile phones worldwide and Lonely Planet has iPhone city guide applications in the Apple App Store. Lonely Planet's emergence as a leading digital media company opens up new vistas for the company. As Andy Conroy, Worldwide Partnership Manager at BBC Future Media and Technology likes to say "The possibilities are only limited by our imagination."

ThoughtWorks continues to work with Lonely Planet on new applications and strategic advice. Traffic and sales continue to grow worldwide, and the Lonely Planet team and the technology now in place are ready to support those unlimited opportunities.