



Specialty Fashion Group seamlessly connects 4,500 Sales Associates in 900 Stores with Google Apps

SPECIALTYFASHION | GROUP

At a Glance

What they wanted to do:

- Replace outmoded fax-and-phone based communications for 4,500 employees across 900 stores, with a cloud-based system.
- Provide managers with up-to-the-minute marketing, merchandising and promotion information creating a consistent brand experience across every store.
- Improve employee productivity and morale by enabling easy-to-use, web-based collaboration.

What they did:

- Deployed Google Apps for Business in SFG headquarters and across 900 stores in Australia, New Zealand and South Africa.
- Provided iPads to access a Google Sites intranet giving managers all information needed to run their stores more efficiently.
- Opened a Google account for each store manager so they could email regional managers and access Google Drive to share documents, spreadsheets and forms.

What they accomplished:

- Dramatically increased employee productivity and reduced time spent on operational tasks, from hours to minutes each week.
- Shared merchandising, markdown and promotion information in real-time, so all stores could provide the same brand experience.
- Saved money on faxes and phone calls and eliminated the costs of printing and shipping paper catalogues.

"Google Apps has saved us hardcore dollars, but it has also provided immeasurable gains in employee productivity and morale. And that is the ultimate win for our business, because happier employees mean happier customers."

– Viren Shah, CIO, SFG

Organisation

Founded in 1993, Specialty Fashion Group (SFG) is the largest women's apparel retail group in Australia. With a mission of "making women everywhere look good and feel great," SFG sells a garment every second in Australia, New Zealand, South Africa or the U.S. through 900 retail outlets and seven online stores.

Challenges

SFG has over 4,500 employees in 900 stores. Across all locations, they strive to deliver a cohesive and consistent experience for its brands – Millers, Crossroads, Katies, Autograph and City Chic. To achieve this goal, sales associates must remain in constant communication with regional managers for up-to-the-minute information on merchandising, promotions, store layouts and markdowns.

SFG's two main ways of communicating were woefully outdated:

1. Each month, store employees received a printed visual merchandising bulletin up to 20 pages long, by mail and fax. It showed how to display products, but by the time stores received it, information was often unclear or had been superseded.
2. Employees used phone and fax to communicate with management. Regional managers left a daily message about promotions and merchandising changes on a central voicemail inbox, and store managers called in to retrieve the information. Stores also received lists of products to mark down, via fax. When store employees needed to report back to regional managers about changes in inventory, faulty stock, customer feedback or other issues, they had to write down and fax the information.

SFG clearly needed to upgrade their communications infrastructure to make communications between store employees and managers more streamlined and collaborative.

Solution

SFG CIO, Viren Shah, sought a cloud-based, scalable communications and collaboration platform that could grow alongside the business as it rapidly expanded across Australia and into new markets. SFG chose to implement Google Apps for Business across its entire network of 900 stores and their main headquarters in Alexandria, NSW.

"I knew we needed a cloud-based solution, because that would be the most cost-effective and take all maintenance and infrastructure issues out of the equation," Viren commented. "From there, it was an easy choice to go with Google Apps, because it's clearly number one in the market for communications and collaboration."

Information-rich intranet

SFG implemented the full suite of Google Apps products, including Forms, Docs and Gmail as well as Google Sites, which has created an information-rich intranet accessible to all store managers. This secure site provides the latest on merchandising, pricing, promotions, markdowns and other critical updates that store associates need daily. No more faxing and mailing paper documents!

Email efficiency

Simultaneously, SFG provided each store with an iPad and its own Gmail address, allowing employees to communicate with regional managers via email. The iPads also changed the way managers display merchandise.

“We post new display photos on the intranet, and managers just walk out on the floor and change the product mix to reflect the photos,” says Shah. “They can change and rearrange layouts to reflect management’s merchandising decisions within an hour – a process that used to take weeks when we sent out printed photos by mail.”

For security, iPads are restricted so employees can only use them to email their regional managers and access select websites and apps.

Keeping track of promotions

SFG also relies on its Google Sites intranet to keep store associates up to date on the latest promotions. Each morning, store managers check which email offers have been sent. Sales assistants ask customers if they received their coupon, and if not, honour it as a bonus.

Improving operations

Store managers use Google Apps to improve store operations in many ways. For example, if a display rack breaks, associates can take a photo and email it to their regional managers. Previously, they filled out a paper damage report and sent it by fax. Associates also use Google Forms and Spreadsheets to keep track of markdowns in progress.

Fast, easy transition

To design and build the intranet on Google Sites, roll out Docs, Forms and Gmail on store iPads and train 4,500 employees took just five months.

“Because Google Apps is so intuitive and easy to use, we were able to skip generations of technology in a single leap. We went from fax-and-phone to an iPad cloud model, and all of our employees just instantly knew how to use Google Apps,” commented Glenn Ryan, Program Management Director at SFG.

“Since store associates were already familiar with Google and iPads in their personal lives, it didn’t take long for them to get up to speed,” says Ryan. “They just turned on their iPads and tapped a button. From there, all the forms, procedures and information they needed were immediately available.”

Results

Rolling out Google Apps across its 900 stores has had four major impacts on Specialty Fashion Group. The biggest is a consistent brand experience across all 900 stores.

1. **Brand reinforcement.** By putting all relevant information in Google Apps, where it’s easily accessible on any device, SFG ensures that all stores look and feel the same. “When a customer walks into a store in Adelaide, she’ll have the same experience as she would in Cape Town, and our in-store merchandising and offers match our online sites,” says Viren Shah.

About Google Apps for Business

Google Apps for Business is an enterprise-ready suite of applications that includes Gmail, Google Calendar (shared calendaring), Google Docs and Spreadsheets (online document hosting and collaboration), Google Sites (team site creation and publishing), and Google Video* (easy, secure sharing of video content).

*Google Video is not available in all countries.

For more information visit
<http://www.google.com.au/apps>

2. **Cost savings.** SFG formerly spent large amounts on phone calls, faxes and creating, printing and shipping visual merchandising bulletins. With Google Apps, much of that spend is eliminated.
3. **More productive, satisfied employees.** Operational tasks that took store managers several hours per week now take them just minutes, and they can spend more time on the floor helping customers. This leads to higher customer satisfaction and increased sales. "It's hard to quantify just how huge of an impact Google Apps has had on morale, but it's massive," says Shah.
4. **International collaboration.** With manufacturing operations based in China, SFG plans to integrate Google Apps throughout their business in the near future. Instead of using FTP file servers to manage transfers of clothing designs and other important documents, teams in China will be able to use Google Docs for secure file sharing. SFG also plans to upload other information like HR, design and production, procurement, distribution, inventory and pricing to Google Docs, Forms and Spreadsheets – putting critical operational data in the cloud for instant access and collaboration among global teams.

