



CASE STUDY: GRAND RAPIDS ASSOCIATION OF REALTORS®

Award-winning success with Zend Server on the i

INDUSTRY

Real estate

WEBSITE

www.grar.com

CHALLENGES

- Bring website in-house
- Keep loyal users happy

SOLUTION

Zend Server on IBM i

RESULTS

- Seamless migration
- Increase in website usage
- Ability to quickly make changes and updates
- COMMON Innovation Award

The leader in online real estate, the Grand Rapids Association of Realtors (GRAR) has been paving the way for internet property searching since 1999. Now an award-winning success, GRAR has seen many levels of change before reaching its current state. What started as a website built on an AS/400 transitioned to a website managed out-of-house on a Windows platform, and eventually brought back in-house for more control and innovation.

With all that change comes uncertainty, but GRAR has been able to keep their loyal users happy — not an easy task with a significantly higher number of competitors than back in 1999. Throughout the years, one thing has remained the same: The trust and confidence GRAR website users have in their property search resource.

The start of evolution

When you have the leading property search website, the natural decision would be to leave it alone. But when you also have an excellent development team, and keep running into budget and time issues with your out-of-house solution, you begin to realize that even the best can get better. Julie Rietberg, chief executive officer at GRAR, knew taking the risk to update the current website would be worth it, and she trusted her team to make it a seamless success. What she wasn't expecting was for everything to go as smoothly as it did.

"We were able to get our proof of concept up and running in one day, and installed WordPress in a couple of hours," said Rietberg. "After seeing the early prototype so quickly, I gave my team the green light to go ahead with the project. I have complete trust in their abilities."

By running on IBM i 7.1 with Zend Server, with the backend business logic all in RPG, GRAR IT staff members Larry Amond, senior developer, and Rick Baumann, director of information services, were confident they could build and maintain a robust and reliable website that their users would appreciate. And they were right.

"We had no migration pain. No hiccups and no fails," said Baumann. "Our environment runs and helps us avoid server sprawl. We scale, it scales with us. It's bulletproof."

Considering the plethora of options to build and manage web applications, Amond expressed his conviction on the choice, "We're doing something great here. We're using WordPress as a front-end web service and CMS without the blog. And it works, this isn't theoretical. I wouldn't hesitate to do it again."

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Rick Baumann, director of information services, Grand Rapids Association of Realtors



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Baumann summarized the project, “Pound for pound we’re doing something very cost effective. I’d encourage everyone to consider looking at IBM i with Zend Server; you just can’t beat it. There’s complexity involved with keeping everything up and running in an Intel/Wintel environment, yet for us it’s been simple.”

Up and running

After rolling out their new website, the GRAR team was anxious to hear the feedback from their many loyal users. Rietberg and her team have always been proud of their committed community of users. But change is hard, and sometimes users leave for other avenues instead of adopting new interfaces. Not so in this case. The GRAR team was amazed at the traffic on their new website, and noticed that it was a very short time before people were back to praising the look, feel, and usability of their website. Despite the struggle many users face when they encounter change, their users were pleased.

In fact, after only one year of the site being live, GRAR had passed the one billion mark of properties returned from searches, and it’s continuing to increase.

Because their website is developed and managed internally, it’s become incredibly flexible. The team no longer has to weigh budget considerations against website changes, and they don’t have to worry about changes taking a long time to reach production. They’re now very flexible and can make all web changes in a timely matter, pushing out these changes as often as they’d like.

According to Rietberg, the true cost savings isn’t the dollars GRAR saved by bringing their web development environment in-house, but in the ability to accommodate new needs on the fly. “Now we can feel comfortable and get creative. We’re back to having fun again with the creative ‘what if’ conversations. It’s much more fun. And you can’t put a price on that.”

Continuing the path of innovation

Up next for GRAR is a challenge all companies know well: Optimization for a mobile responsive website. The team currently has a responsive, but not optimized, website for mobile access. They’ll be leveraging all the site data natively so they can truly provide a user-enriched experience for their already happy customers.

After much recognition, including the COMMON/IBM 2017 Power Systems Innovation award, it’s no wonder GRAR continues to be a leader in their industry. Pushing the technology and keeping their users as the top priority has landed GRAR in a position where they can continue to lead the way for others in their industry.