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# Charlotte's Saddlery

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— **Tim Raisbeck** | Co-Owner, Charlotte's Saddlery

When a business with a legacy of exceptional customer service wants to modernize its website, what's the best e-commerce platform to use?

Charlotte's Saddlery knew they needed a platform that would complement their retail locations without complicating their business. They turned to Miva for a new site that extends their customer-centered focus to their online users while also simplifying daily operations.

## Problem

- » Dated website design and features
- » Limited e-commerce integration with brick-and-mortar locations

In 1976, Charlotte Raisbeck learned that Houston lacked a good tack store for English-style horseback riders. Though she lived in Missouri and had a career in real estate, the knowledge of a market need that fit her passions proved to be a powerful draw. She packed up her life, moved to Texas, and opened Charlotte's Saddlery out of a small Houston warehouse.

### Personal Warmth and Style

Charlotte initially kept things simple, only selling tack and riding supplies for English riders. She worked hard and developed her business by traveling to horse shows on the weekends, and within a year of opening she moved to a larger space to accommodate her company's growth.

Over the next 20 years, Charlotte's Saddlery steadily expanded to become the area's premier equestrian retail location. Charlotte's twin sons, Mark and Tim, both joined the business by 1981, and the company opened its second retail location in 1984.

When they look back on the early years of the company and talk about

why their mother was successful, the twins describe their mother's charisma and way of connecting with people. "Charlotte was such a unique and friendly person," they write on their website, "that many horse people would come by simply to say 'Hi' and chat. Her personal warmth and style had a tremendous influence on the success and growth of the business."

Charlotte passed away in 1995 after a battle with cancer, and her sons took over the business with the goal of preserving her legacy and expanding their ability to serve the needs of the greater equestrian community. Charlotte's Saddlery now offers both English and Western style riding equipment, and they launched their website in 2000 to connect with customers throughout the United States and abroad.

### E-Commerce 1.0 with NetObject

Some companies launch a website simply to have a virtual signpost for their business. Others make product information available but prefer not to have a sales component. The

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Email: sales@miva.com  
[www.miva.com](http://www.miva.com)

## Solution

- » Custom Miva-built site with cutting-edge look and feel
- » Modern front-end functionality
- » Back-end integration with key business systems

Charlotte's Saddlery team built their website ([www.charlottes-saddlery.com](http://www.charlottes-saddlery.com)) for e-commerce from the very beginning. "We launched the site because we saw it as another opportunity to improve sales," says Tim Raisbeck. "Sure, there was information on there about our various products, but the whole goal from the beginning was e-commerce."

That first Charlotte's Saddlery site in 2000 was built using NetObject. "We chose them," Raisbeck says, "because at the time I wasn't really into HTML coding." Raisbeck and his team knew they didn't want to build a custom platform from scratch, so they looked for a simple solution that could offer them the basic functionality they needed.

"Back then, NetObject made it easy," explains Raisbeck. "You just drew a little box, typed in your text, and that was it." He also points out that their website wasn't very expansive at the time of the original launch. "I had things separated by department," he says, "but the overall number of products just wasn't that large when we started out."

### A Step Forward

"After one or two versions of our site on NetObject," Tim Raisbeck says, "I began to look at other alternatives." It had only been a few years, but he was starting to see that NetObject was limited in how far it could take the Charlotte's Saddlery website.

"This is around 10 years ago now," Raisbeck remembers, "but I attended an e-commerce seminar that Miva hosted in Dallas." He came away from the seminar

realizing that Miva was a better option than his current platform. "Even back then," he continues, "I saw that Miva could offer me more than what I had been using."

"The main thing that impressed me," explains Raisbeck, "was the scalability of the platform." As they began to see sales growth via the e-commerce channel on NetObject, Raisbeck realized that his platform's ability to grow with the business would be critical in the long run. "At that seminar I saw that you could take your site as far as you wanted with Miva," Raisbeck says. "There were so many different things it could do with the available modules, and NetObject just didn't have much of that at all."

As he learned more about the Miva e-commerce platform, Raisbeck came to see it as the best way to move the company's website forward. "I could tell that Miva offered us a lot of opportunities for growth," he says, "and I saw it as something that was going to be around for a long time." In 2003 Charlotte's Saddlery went ahead and moved their website to Miva.

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### Modernizing with Miva

"We made that original transition to Miva," says Raisbeck, "and I've been a believer ever since." He cites stability and excellent support access as two primary reasons why he has stayed with the platform. By 2013, the Charlotte's Saddlery website was still basically the same site that they built when they transitioned to Miva in 2003. "We had put in some incremental fixes over the years," Raisbeck says, "but we never did any major design or functionality overhauls since building our site off the original template."

Early in 2013, Raisbeck decided that he wanted to do a website redesign. "It finally struck me that our site wasn't as professional looking as it should be for a company like ours," he explains. "I began to feel like we might be able to improve our online sales if we had a more attractive and user-friendly site." He browsed the modern templates available on Miva and thought they felt much fresher than his existing look. "I did go out for a few bids on the redesign, but I decided to have Miva do the work directly," he says. "I just felt more comfortable working with Miva for something as big as a major rebuild."

Raisbeck says the rebuild process was straight-forward. Their goals were to build a modern website, both from a functionality and design standpoints. The rebuilt Charlotte's Saddlery Miva site includes improvements in three key areas:

#### Look and Feel

- » "Our new website has a more current look and feel than we had before the redesign," Raisbeck says. The site features components that today's web users have come to expect from modern websites, including dynamic content on the homepage and a fully-functional mobile version of the site for smartphone and tablet users.

#### Front-End Functionality

- » "In our stores," Raisbeck says, "we place a high priority on taking care of the customer's needs." It was important to Charlotte's Saddlery, therefore, that their new website reflect that care for the customer. "This basically means that we wanted the online experience to be as easy and painless as possible," Raisbeck explains.

"For example," he continues, "since we have such a wide range of products, the navigation functionality is very important. With the new site we implemented a hover effect on the menus so that users can get a quick overview of the product lines and quickly navigate to the section they need." Rather than needing to click through a directory tree, users on the new site can typically get to the

product page they are looking for with one click from the home page.

## Back-end Functionality

- » While they were working on the rebuild, Raisbeck and his team decided to address some key integration issues with their other business systems. "A big thing for us was getting integration with Keystroke," he says. Keystroke is the point-of-sale (POS) system Charlotte's Saddlery uses in their retail stores, and it was not previously integrated with their website.

"Before the new site," Raisbeck explains, "it was difficult for us to keep inventory counts accurate between the online and retail stores." They also realized it was important to reflect both in-stock and available-for-order inventory, and the old system wasn't doing this reliably.

"We spoke with Keystroke and Miva," Raisbeck says, "and figured out that integration between the two was possible." For Charlotte's Saddlery, this was an obvious feature to have Miva build into the new site. "We can now get a real-time view of what we have available between our two stores and the e-commerce world," Raisbeck says.

## Built for Results

Charlotte's Saddlery went live with their new Miva website in August of 2013, and Tim Raisbeck says they are

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happy with the results they've seen over the first year. "Well, the most obvious thing to point to is an increase in overall online sales," Raisbeck says. "And that's really a function of a few different aspects of the redesign." He says the improved design and functionality contribute to the gains they've seen, but he also points out that the new site allows them to run their business in better ways.


"Yes, the new site design is more attractive, and functionality improvements like the navigation are very important," he says. "We feel like these things have helped give us a better overall online presence within our industry." But Raisbeck goes on to highlight how the new site has also made online marketing efforts easier. "We are now able to utilize pay-per-click campaigns since the site makes it so much simpler," he says. "Obviously, being able to run these campaigns more effectively has had a direct impact on our sales numbers."

Raisbeck points to search engine optimization as another example of

why their sales have improved. "SEO is also much easier with the new site," he says. "It can be tough these days for a company to keep up with the latest SEO strategies and techniques, but I get information now from Miva on what I should be doing. They help keep me up-to-date on all things SEO."

Through the entire process, Raisbeck has remained happy with the quality of the support he gets from Miva. "This was true when we were on our old Miva site," he says, "it was true during the redesign and build process, and of course it's also the case now that our new site is live." He says that he's found the Miva support team to be very accessible, whether over the phone or via email. "And also, the Miva forums are a great resource when we don't necessarily need direct support."

"For Charlotte's Saddlery," Raisbeck says, "our experiences with the new site have reinforced why we're with Miva." He points out the broad range of capabilities and improvements Miva has implemented. "Whether it's keeping up with modern functionality, SEO, or Google analytics, Miva really is an all-encompassing e-commerce platform. I can't imagine switching to any other e-commerce software at this point."

"When I'm working the floor at our retail locations," Raisbeck concludes, "I can be confident that my Miva site is stable and representing us well online. As a business owner, they make it easy for me to run the company." 





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