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Oliver + S

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— **Todd Gibson** | Managing Partner, Oliver + S

When you're not willing to sacrifice user experience for the sake of your webstore, what is the right e-commerce platform to choose?

Oliver + S chose Miva for a store that would seamlessly integrate with the rest of their website while providing the power and flexibility for whatever growth the future would bring.

Ten years ago, Liesl Gibson was living a fashion designer's dream. After graduating from the prestigious Fashion Institute of Technology in New York, she had been working as a designer for an assortment of premier clothing companies, including Ralph Lauren and Tommy Hilfiger. Her prospects within the industry were promising, and she was well-positioned with her education and experience to enjoy a career designing for powerhouse brands in the global capital of her profession.

But the birth of her daughter brought a change in perspective that would lead her down a different path. While her husband Todd continued working as a management consultant, Liesl left her position at Tommy Hilfiger to care for their child. It was in this new role of mother that she found an opportunity to pursue fashion design in a fresh, unexpected way.

For the sake of fun and to keep her skills sharp, Liesl gave herself the challenge of designing and sewing a wardrobe for her daughter each season. She launched a blog to document her

efforts and people started commenting on her daughter's outfits. When they began asking where they could buy the dresses she was making, Liesl thought she might be on to something.

Her husband Todd, who today is the managing partner of Oliver + S, describes what happened next. "Liesl had worked in fashion long enough to know the world didn't need another children's clothing brand" he says. But she also knew from looking around that there wasn't anything she liked in the market for children's clothing patterns. "To her eye," Todd says, "the styles were out of date and the sizing wasn't contemporary."

Seeing a clear opportunity, Liesl founded Oliver + S in 2007 to produce patterns for stylish children's clothing of her own design. Her original plan was to pursue a business-to-business (B2B) model, with Oliver + S selling patterns to fabric retailers who would in turn sell the patterns to their customers. The company started with four products and began seeking retailers.



Photo: Katherine Slingluff

Problem

- » Can your e-commerce platform adjust to market conditions and grow with your business?

“We are so happy with Miva. It meets all the needs we have, and the value is excellent!”

— Todd Gibson
Managing Partner, Oliver + S

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Solution

- » Miva fully integrates with all of your website's elements
- » Build a fully responsive site for today's web users
- » Grow your business with the power and flexibility of Miva

Changing Market Conditions

"A B2B model was really the main goal," Todd Gibson says, "but it also seemed like a good idea to set up a website to sell the patterns directly to customers." Liesl launched her website (oliverands.com) in 2008, though she expected e-commerce through the site to make up only a fraction of the business. "It was really just to get product in the hands of people who couldn't find the patterns in their local fabric store," Todd says.

By 2009, Oliver + S had grown enough that Todd left his consulting job to join the company full time as the managing partner. While Liesl focused her energies on product development, Todd brought structure to the business side of the company and ensured things were running as efficiently as possible. One of his primary tasks was overseeing the website, and this gave him an excellent perspective on their e-commerce growth as market conditions in the fabric industry began to change.

"Starting In 2010," he says, "we saw that retailers were carrying fewer and fewer of our patterns in their stores." They attributed this pull-back to the overall economic recession at the time. "These retailers were cutting back on their secondary inventory items so they could focus on strengthening their core fabric business," Todd says.

It was about this time Oliver + S also started to see direct business-to-consumer (B2C) sales grow via the website. "When we launched the website in 2008," Todd explains, "our revenue split was around 80 percent from the wholesale channels and 20

percent through the site." It was this balance that started shifting, and Todd says it reached the tipping point a few years ago. "We finally hit that mark where we found ourselves doing the majority of our sales through the site."

Today, online B2C sales make up 75% of the company's revenue. In addition to a vastly expanded selection of patterns, the website offers video tutorials, sewing supplies and books, and it has grown into an online hub for anyone interested in learning how to sew.

E-Commerce with Miva

When the Oliver + S website launched in 2008, the company chose Miva as their e-commerce platform. "We made the decision to go with Miva right out of the gate," Todd Gibson says, "before we even had our first dollar of sales." He says this turned out to be the right choice, and he highlights the main reasons why.

"Miva was the right choice because it allowed us to look a lot bigger than we actually were, and because Miva has grown with us and will continue to allow us to grow for years into the future."

—Todd Gibson
Managing Partner,
Oliver + S

"We originally chose Miva based on a recommendation from our developer at the time," Gibson explains, "and from the beginning we couldn't have been happier with how things went. Miva was the right choice because it allowed us to look a lot bigger than we actually were, and because Miva has grown with us and will continue to allow us to grow for years into the future."

A Professional Online Presence

Gibson talks about the ways Miva enabled them to come across as a full-grown company before they had made a single sale through the website.

Complete Design Control

Design and visual style have always been important parts of the Oliver + S brand. Because of this, they were looking for an e-commerce platform that would give them complete control over the look and feel of the store.

"Back in 2007 when we were doing preliminary development on the site, it wasn't always a given that you'd have control over these elements," says Gibson. He points out that this was particularly true of the platforms aimed at smaller e-commerce operations. "This ability to customize the visual aspect of our store was one of the biggest reasons we originally went with Miva."

Seamless Integration with Other Website Components

"Some companies use Miva for their complete website," Gibson says, "but that has never been the way we've used Miva." The Oliver + S site is more than just a webstore. "We have a very active blog, discussion forums, and lot of different sections of content," he explains, "and all of those elements are done outside of Miva."

- » "We use WordPress for the blog," he says, "and the discussion forum is run using BuddyPress. The rest of the site is a home-grown PHP content management system." Given the multi-platform nature of the site, it was important that their e-commerce provider be able to integrate with these other elements. "Miva integrates perfectly with all of our site's components," Gibson says. "We just wrap the shop in the look and feel of the rest of the site and everything works together very well."
- » "For our customers," he continues, "the integration is complete and seamless. Someone can come to our site, read a blog post about a

specific product, jump straight to the store to add that item to their cart, and then go to the discussion forums to ask a question about the item. On our site, all of those things are on different platforms, but to a customer the integration is seamless. That user experience is very important to us, and it's another one of the key reasons we use Miva."

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Gibson points out that these reasons—design control and integration with the other website elements—could be considered two sides of the same coin. "They work together," he says. "Since we can completely customize the look and feel of the site, we're able to take advantage of that seamless integration to really fine-tune our users' experience."

Oliver + S found that this combination wasn't available with other platforms they considered for the webstore. "For really small businesses, or businesses that are just getting online, the competition has some severe limitations," Gibson says.

"Platforms like Yahoo Stores only allow you to create pretty ugly sites, and when it comes time to check out, they take customers off to some odd domain name that differs from your brand to complete the transaction. That's a bad user experience and it limits consumer trust."

» "Another problem we saw with these smaller platforms," Gibson continues, "is that payment would have to be done exclusively through a third-party like PayPal. That means there would be a whole chunk of data relevant to our sales process that we just wouldn't have anywhere. Since all of that process is under our own roof with Miva, there are tons of things we can glean from the data to optimize our sales process and order fulfillment."

Gibson notes that other platforms also have a problem matching Miva's integration with non-store elements of the site. "Volusion or Shopify require you to run your e-commerce site, but only your e-commerce site on their platform," he says. "I know some of our competitors use these platforms, and they have separate URLs for their

store, their blog, and their main website. The pages are not integrated from the customer's viewpoint, and again, we see that as a really bad user experience. It has a negative impact on trust and credibility—not to mention the fact that they are hindering their SEO efforts by having these pieces of their business on different domains."

"Miva, on the other hand," Gibson says, "gives you complete flexibility in terms of design and allows a much better degree of integration with other website elements under a single domain name. This has been so important for us, and has let us appear to be much bigger, better, and more trustworthy than if we had gone with another provider."

Responsive Design with Miva

Todd Gibson and the Oliver + S team are convinced that their focus on the user experience has helped them gain the trust of their customers and drive growth over the years. As market forces in their industry have changed, they've been well-positioned to take advantage of the trends they have seen.

"Miva really allowed us to grow and to scale the business," Gibson says. "We started with zero online sales, then watched those sales grow, and we've now transformed from a B2B to a B2C company. All of this was in response to changing dynamics in the marketplace, and we did it all with Miva as our platform."

In addition to making the B2C transition, Oliver + S has been on the cutting edge of the move toward mobile-responsive site design over the past five years. "Back around 2010," Gibson says, "we saw mobile traffic on our site start to increase. It was growing at maybe a percent or two a

month, and by the end of that first year of watching we had 10-15 percent of our traffic coming from mobile."

Gibson says the segment just kept growing. "We realized our customers were coming to the site to view the blog and forums from their mobile phones and tablets, so we wanted to make sure the shop could also accommodate users on those devices."

When they started thinking about how to meet the needs of these mobile users, Gibson assumed they would need a completely different site for mobile devices. "That was sort of the standard method out there at the time for catering to mobile," he says. "But our developer explained to us what responsive design was, and he thought Miva should be able to do that for us."

With their developer's help, they moved forward with a site rebuild that incorporated responsive design across all of their website components. "Our developer built the site and the framework," Gibson says, "and then we worked with a Miva specialist to implement our site's responsive framework within Miva so that the shop would be completely responsive along with the rest of the site."

"Now Miva has the bootstrap framework that allows everyone to build a responsive Miva site," Gibson says. "But at the time, we were one of the first Miva sites to do that."

» "And it worked beautifully. We were able to do the Miva portion of our site perfectly for mobile. The page completely redraws across devices and orientations."

Given the priority that Oliver + S places on user experience, it is no surprise that they value the ability to offer a consistent experience for users

regardless of how they are accessing the site. And again, Gibson stresses the importance of the integration between the various website elements. "The responsive nature of our site doesn't end at the webstore," he says. "As it has always been, there's no difference in the experience users have between the various sections of our website, no matter their device."

Gibson also cites practical reasons for the responsive design. "It's a big benefit for us on the maintenance side since we don't have two separate versions of the site to maintain," he says. "We only have one site to update, maintain, and deal with order fulfillment from. Everything still works directly from our Miva site, it's just that the content is now wrapped up in the responsive framework. Since there's no separate mobile site, things are very easy."

Oliver + S launched their new responsive site in March of 2012, and Gibson says mobile devices now account for over 45% of their traffic.

Connecting with the Modern Customer

Through all of their growth and the changing technology of the web, Oliver + S continues to focus on building a fun and unique experience for their community of users. One of the ways they do this today is via the Play feature on their site (oliverands.com/play). Using the feature, visitors can dress virtual paper dolls with the various outfits produced by the patterns that Oliver + S sells.

With a laugh, Gibson describes how the paper dolls have become a key part of the Oliver + S brand. "Well, paper dolls are really these timeless and nostalgic items, but they can be made contemporary just by the outfits you're

using. And our products fit into that sort of classic-contemporary space, so we thought it was a great thing to use to brand ourselves and differentiate ourselves in the marketplace."

"On the first version of our website, users would just click on the product, and it would load an image showing the product on the paper doll. When we went to do the redesign with Miva, we obviously wanted to keep the feature, but we thought there might be a way to have it be interactive. Now, there's a drag-and-drop component that makes it a little more fun."

Gibson says they hear from customers that it's a good way to guarantee return visits to the site. "Kids love to play with the feature," he says, "because it's fun and a little unusual. So from a business standpoint, it helps differentiate our brand, but then it's also a direct sales driver since kids can go on there and create an outfit they're interested in, and then the parents can click through right to the shopping cart and purchase the patterns that their kids have picked out."

Wholesale Roots

Although the majority of their business is now direct-to-consumer, Oliver + S still makes a quarter of their annual revenue from the wholesale side of their operations. A key feature of their Miva e-commerce site is the flexibility to handle the wholesale accounts that want to interact via the website. "Most of our B2B purchasers interact with us outside of the website," Gibson says, "but we do allow some of them to purchase directly from the site."

"Miva allows us to set up price and availability groups and then associate certain customers with

those groups," he says. "This allows our wholesale customers to log in with their wholesale ID and then complete their orders online. The shop customers who want to do it this way have found the feature to be extremely valuable, and again, it is Miva's power and flexibility that allow us to offer this option."

A Platform for the Future

"Our story," says Gibson, "is really one of a company that has grown up from nothing because of what Miva has allowed us to do. It's a solution that from the very beginning has been right in step with our growth as a company. The flexibility and scalability gives us so much room for growth into the future. Even if we were to continue growing at 45 percent for the next 10 years, we'd still not outgrow the platform."

- » "It's also worth pointing out that the ease-of-use with Miva is very high," he says. "You don't need to know more than basic HTML to do some really interesting things. I'm not a programmer, but I'm the one doing the majority of the work on our site." Gibson also says the platform has been very stable for the company. "We handle the front-end ourselves, and I don't think I've filed a support ticket in over a year."
- » "We are so happy with Miva," he concludes. "It meets all the needs we have, and the value is excellent! For what we pay, we're getting a super deal. I am constantly changing vendors for other aspects of our business in order to get the best possible value and level of service. But with our e-commerce platform, I've never felt the need to look at any other system." 

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