As Shane Lowry marked his historic win in The 148th Open Championship in front of cheering crowds in July 2019, championship organizer The R&A was also celebrating another victory: the success of a re-imagined website built on the Sitecore platform. Golf’s original championship and the only major played outside of the US, The Open is followed by 100 million fans worldwide. Thanks to a visionary digital transformation, fans of The Open can enjoy richer engagement not just during the Championship, but all year long.

The Challenge

The R&A has run The Open website on Sitecore since 2009, but site content focused on the Championship itself—not the months leading up to it with qualifying events, human interest stories, must-have merchandise, and great golf.

“The Open cycle starts in November and builds up for the following year,” said Kevin Bain, Head of Data and Digital Infrastructure at The R&A. “The old site was quite static. It often looked like nothing new was happening. We took a fresh look at what TheOpen.com could do to re-engage existing fans and capture new ones.”

The R&A set out to integrate qualification-game coverage, ticketing and hospitality sales, merchandising, and the live event itself as a single connected experience. For the 2019 Championship, the project established target milestones: Sell 50% of tickets by the end of January, supported by a streamlined buying process. Sell out tickets and hospitality before the event to generate income sooner and stop selling tickets at the gate. Maximize revenue through up-selling and cross-selling—something never done before. Build excitement. Double the number of active members in The One Club Membership.

With 52% of traffic coming from mobile devices, it was imperative to take a mobile-first approach.
The Sitecore Solution

The R&A engaged Sitecore partner UNRVLD to transform The Open website from a fan engagement point of view, supported by a technical architecture that streamlines and energizes the customer experience. UNRVLD deployed Sitecore Experience Platform (XP) 9.0.1 and Sitecore Experience Database (xDB) hosted on AWS, using Sitecore Helix design principles.

Phase One, completed in July 2018, deployed a new portal to sell approximately 200,000 tickets and hospitality packages for The 148th Open the following July. Sitecore integrates with ticketing provider SecuTix to simplify what had been an unnecessarily complicated ticket-buying experience.

Phase Two focused on building year-long excitement for The Open through such features as a dynamic news feed, a timeline showcasing qualifying events and players, player profiles, upcoming-venue information, and personalized banner management. Leveraging Sitecore personalization capabilities and integrations, the site presents versions tailored to the user’s location.

Phase Three created a game-changing live-event experience for the 7 million visitors to The Open website in July 2019. Features included dynamic scoring incorporating player information, a new leaderboard format, live video and audio streaming, a live blog, video on demand — and much more, to create in-the-moment engagement.

“Sitecore has provided a flexible and scalable platform on which we have built a fully integrated golf solution, incorporating a high-performance ticket-builder, dynamic news and qualification components, and an immersive live event experience,” said Tom Holt, Lead Technology Strategist at UNRVLD. “All underpinned by an intuitive admin interface and optimized to deliver high performance under extreme load.”

The Outcome

The new site exceeded expectations. Ticket revenue in the first 30 minutes surpassed the entire first day a year earlier — without straining load capacity. By 4 p.m., The R&A had achieved 10% of its Open sales target for the year — a trend that continued with Champion Day ticket sellouts. The conversion rate from ticket landing page to purchase confirmation increased by 126%. In record time, The R&A closed in on its goal of doubling active registered members.

“We’ve taken a new approach; we’ve put the customer at the center. Whenever you visit The Open site, there’s something new now. It’s easier and quicker to find what you are looking for. The R&A’s ultimate goal is to ensure that golf thrives 50 years from now. This solution re-energizes our fans while maximizing commercial opportunities so we can invest back into the sport of golf.”

— Kevin Bain, Head of Data and Digital Infrastructure, The R&A
A notable 47% of ticket sales are on mobile devices, with 55% more mobile page views and a 22% drop in the mobile bounce rate.

The transformed site serves Open fans better and more efficiently while increasing revenue to support the game of golf worldwide.

The platform also carded impressive results during its first Championship:

- Number of sessions per user increased by 15.5% —meaning more fans kept coming back
- Page views increased by 24.1% —fans looked at almost a quarter more content than before
- Average session duration increased by 55.8% —testament to the unrivaled access and information available, fans spent more than half the amount of time on the site than during last year’s Championship
- More than 250,000 sign-ups to Live Streaming —more fans engaging with The Open and watching the action unfold online
- Highest ever future event ticket sales achieved during the championship week
- More than 20 million ad impressions during the tournament —ensuring The Open’s partners got the exposure they required.

To learn more visit sitecore.com