Sitecore partners with Microsoft to reimagine partner network digital experiences through AI-powered personalization

One of the world’s leading brands in delivering digital experiences, Sitecore brings nearly two decades of expertise in reimagining customer experiences. From its founding in 2001 in Copenhagen, Denmark, the firm has become a powerhouse, known and relied on by its customers for its innovation and ability to push boundaries in technology to create differentiated digital experiences.

Given that Sitecore operates in digital mediums, the company routinely handles vast arrays of data and content. Finding ways to maximize the value of that data and content has been an important focus for the company over the years. That is why the advent of artificial intelligence (AI) was of great interest to its leadership, for its potential to treat data and content in entirely new ways.

A natural fit

In fact, Sitecore’s leaders saw AI as a great way to get even better at delivering tailored digital experiences for customers. Marcos Perreau Guimaraes, VP and Chief Data Scientist, Sitecore says, “we’ve been interested in AI for a long time. There are a lot of natural uses for AI in our space, from websites to other online experiences.” AI’s capacity to use data to deliver new levels of personalization, as well as automate much of that effort was of particular interest.

Sitecore is no stranger to building personalization solutions—they’ve been doing so for quite some time. Normally, personalization is built by using deterministic rules. For example, if a user buys a service, rules can determine they don’t need to see another advertisement for the

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service they now own. But personalization that requires large amounts of data, and draws on a variety of factors, such as people, or behaviors, can strain the rule-based model. “At Sitecore, we don’t want to break the rules, but want to add the capacity for machine learning to learn and adapt through data,” Marcus notes.

Sitecore started to put its AI team together in the spring of 2018. They quickly brought together a diverse set of skills in machine learning (ML) that spanned most modern frameworks. The company’s goal was to not only develop new AI and ML algorithms but also plan for how to productize their learnings. They soon received an opportunity to do both, when they got a call from Microsoft.

A two-way partnership

Sitecore and Microsoft have a long relationship. Microsoft has recognized Sitecore on several occasions as Global ISV of the year, winning awards in 2013 and 2014 before being named as a finalist in 2019. Not only is Sitecore one of Microsoft’s strongest alliance partners, but they’ve also helped Microsoft with their own digital experiences over the years, with Microsoft in the role of the customer.

Gavriella Schuster, Microsoft Corporate VP, One Commercial Partner, summarizes the relationship by noting that “we are partnering with Sitecore to co-innovate and utilize Microsoft AI to create personalized digital experiences for customers.”

“Sitecore is a key strategic cloud and AI partner. We are very focused on co-innovating and creating personalized experiences for customers by bringing together Microsoft Cloud and AI capabilities with Sitecore’s digital experience platform,” adds Simran Sachar, AI Partner Lead and Sr. Strategy Manager, Microsoft.

Back in 2016, Sitecore helped modernize Microsoft’s Partner Network (MPN) website, making it more streamlined and efficient. Three years later, the Microsoft One Commercial Partner (OCP) organization called on Sitecore again to take that web experience one step further—to make the site’s approach to personalization more engaging and useful for visitors, and faster and easier to manage for marketers.

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“Our partner ecosystem has been growing very rapidly. To keep up with that growth, we felt we needed to take our website up a notch to provide a higher level of support,” says Wina Wichienwidhtaya, OCP Marketing Technologist, Microsoft. With the Partner Network website supporting a complex audience of thousands of partners, all coming to the site with different needs, the OCP team felt increasing the level of personalization would allow them to meet partners where they are and help them get to where they want to go, faster.

Building AI solutions

The Microsoft OCP team offered Sitecore both the opportunity to get to know the Microsoft Azure platform, and then be able to act on their learnings by developing solutions that would deliver tangible value to the Microsoft Partner Network. Excited by the possibility, the Sitecore team dived right in.

“We were worried it would take too long to start from scratch on the new platform. But it proved surprisingly easy, which was amazing,” says Marcos. That ease-of-use was an important element to maintain in any solutions created—they needed to be accessible and easy to manage by Microsoft’s team of marketers.

As Sitecore ramped up on the platform, the team received support from the Microsoft AI and Azure teams. That allowed them to build and test ideas quickly, and begin a pilot that addresses three of the major challenges with personalization:

1) Identifying visitor segments through AI, so the OCP team can better understand their visitors’ behavior and why they come to the MPN site. “We know visitors are on a journey, but that the specific path may be different for each partner. We want to understand where each person is and be able to communicate in a manner that connects with our partners. We previously made educated guesses about what activities define a partner’s interest, but using AI lets us apply data directly to this problem in an actionable way,” says Wina.

2) Personalizing content through ML algorithms that align content to specific visitors. It is particularly important for the OCP team at Microsoft given the sheer size of the partner audience—knowing who their visitors are (for example, differentiating between a developer versus a marketer) will help them provide the right content, in the right depth and tone.

3) Implementing personalization with AI simplifies the process of manual personalization rules, which were educated cases by removing the overhead of defining the visitor segment.

The three solutions will allow the Microsoft OCP team to be more effective at delivering guided experiences for their visitors, delivering content that is useful and actionable, and meets partners wherever they are in their journeys.

From pilot to reality

As the pilot progresses, test results indicate visitors are already benefiting from improved personalization, driving higher engagement from target audiences who are receiving higher value, and more relevant content. The initial success is only the beginning.

The Microsoft OCP team is already looking ahead at what’s next, working with Sitecore on planning additional AI-powered functionality, such as chat boxes that could help speed up how partners connect with information. In turn, the Sitecore team is building on their AI learnings to bring a whole new level of digital experiences to its wider customer base.

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