Extending the brand experience with remote widgets

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IBM

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Introduction

According to the IBM Global CEO Study, nine out of 10 CEOs are focused on getting closer to their customer. However, the proliferation of new digital mediums, interaction models and touch points has fragmented the customer journey, making it more difficult to connect with customers. Customers no longer start their search on a company's website or even a search engine. Now, they look for their friends' opinions on social networks, or scour the web for reviews to validate their purchases. Product discovery also happens in new ways as customers may start their shopping on an affiliate's website, read a thread in a community or ask their social networks for opinions. In reality, customers form impressions before they can be exposed to a brand's well-defined marketing campaign.

In this whitepaper, we will take an in-depth look at the new market drivers for remote widget technology and understand how they can be used to enable commerce everywhere. We will also look at the built-in widgets provided in IBM® WebSphere® Commerce. This functionality is enabled through a partnership with KickApps, and uses the powerful KickApps App Studio to build and distribute remote widgets, which, along with the mechanics of the integration with WebSphere Commerce will be reviewed in detail.

Market drivers

Because of today's fragmented brand experience, it is imperative for marketers to propagate their message where their current and potential customers are spending time. They can no longer expect customers to start their shopping experience at their website. It is a more realistic scenario that a customer will start by seeing a friend's review of a product on Facebook or by searching the product category online.

Customer interactions are happening faster and more frequently than ever. Most Facebook users visit the site at least once a day, and many spend hours interacting with friends and brands. It is imperative for a brand to be able to engage with the customer where that customer wants to be. Whether it's on a Facebook brand page, where the deal of the day can be posted, or on an affiliate's website, where the customer happens to be looking at related content, that's where a brand needs to be.

Enabling commerce anywhere

WebSphere Commerce Version 7.0 Feature Enhancement Pack 1 (FEP1) delivers powerful new ways to connect with your target audience. By using remote widgets, you are able to both extend the brand experience and promote viral marketing.

WebSphere Commerce provides powerful new capabilities in FEP1 enhancements to capture the customers' attention and interact with them on their terms—wherever, whenever and however they want.

Remote Widgets provide an orchestrated brand experience across channels

Marketers using IBM Management Center for WebSphere Commerce combined with the powerful capabilities of WebSphere Commerce Precision Marketing, lets you react to changes over time and update the remote widget content from a single location. You can create, schedule, and execute orchestrated marketing campaigns that push content to remote widgets across the web. These widgets are easily created and may be customized for the context of each site. Web widgets are portable and may be placed on virtually any Internet property, affiliate partner or social networking site. Marketers can now execute campaigns that hit thousands of remote sites in conjunction with direct digital channels to innovate and create a fresh brand experience.

The solution also capitalizes on viral shopping, enabling customers to share their wish lists, gift registries and other lists (such as favorite products) on social networks like Facebook through remote widgets. This is especially important given the growing influence of these marketing channels. For example, Facebook surpassed Google in traffic in March 2010[1] and reached its 500 millionth member in July 2010,[2] while showing no signs of slowing down anytime soon.

The different types of remote widgets

WebSphere Commerce enables a number of remote widget types. In this section, we will describe them and explain when and why they should be used.

E-Marketing Spot remote widgets

Marketing managers can syndicate marketing information and display it on external websites, such as partner and affiliate sites using e-Marketing Spot remote widgets.

Marketing managers also can add the "Share" capability to any e-Marketing Spot content in the online store to allow shoppers to share the e-Marketing Spot widget on their own social networks, blog or personal web pages. For example, shoppers may want to let all their Facebook friends know that there is a great sale on furniture at the Madisons store this week.
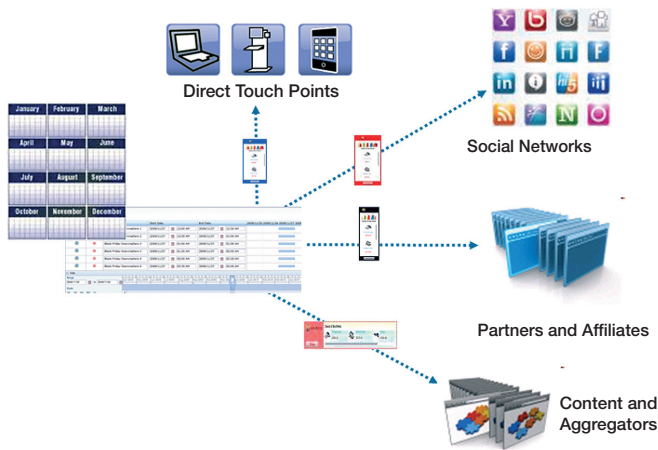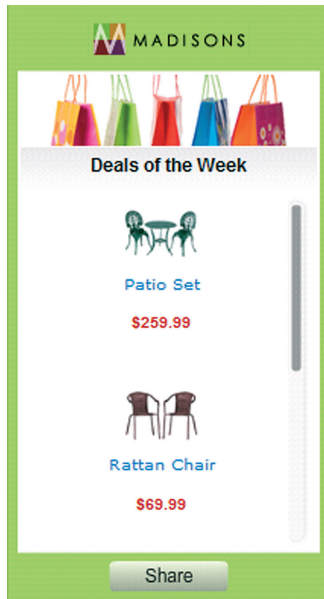
Figure 1: An example of a "Deals of the Week" e-Marketing Spot remote widget which shows the "Deals of the Week" featured products. This widget can be distributed and embedded in external websites.

Wish list remote widgets

When a shopper creates a wish list on the storefront, they can share a wish list widget with their social networks, blog and other personal web pages. The wish list widget displays items from the online store that the shopper has added to the wish list. Shoppers can take advantage of these portable wish lists to let friends and family know about gifts they want to receive. By positioning these widgets where their friends and families are most likely to see the information, both the recipient and retailers benefit when more gifts are purchased.
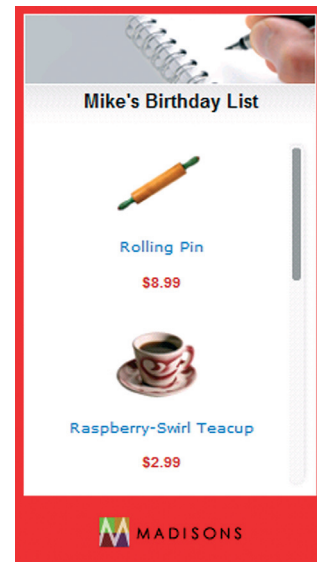

Figure 2: An example of a wish list remote widget.

Gift registry remote widgets

This type of remote widget is similar to the wish list version. Customers can use the gift registry remote widgets to publicize their gift registry on social networks, blogs and other personal web pages.

This helps customers easily publicize their gift registry lists. Now it is easy for friends and family who want to celebrate life events with the registrant to find out what they really want, and everyone benefits from the enhanced shopping experience. For retailers, the benefits are evident: it is the most effective way to target an interested audience who is most likely to act upon the purchase opportunity.
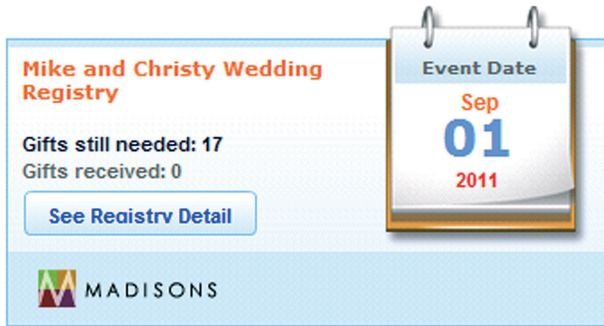
Figure 3: An example of a gift registry remote widget.

KickApps' community platform

KickApps (www.kickapps.com) is a web-based social publishing platform that enables web publishers and marketers to develop branded communities, social applications and interactive widgets that can be implemented both at their domain and throughout the social web.

The platform includes a set of robust social engagements—including comments, ratings, "favoriting" and sharing—that can be associated with your entire product database and integrated into your existing storefront interface through application programming interface (API). Through these social engagements, you can learn volumes about the online behaviors and interests of your customer base as they interact with the products in your storefront.

KickApps App Studio

The KickApps App Studio is a web-based tool that allows anyone to quickly and easily assemble interactive, trackable and monetizable Adobe® Flash applications and widgets that can be shared around the social web.

Because all social interaction data is stored in KickApps' centralized social publishing platform, the App Studio truly provides business users and marketers with the tools to unify their online presence across domains and platforms. With the App Studio, brands can build custom Facebook fan-page tabs that share design, content and social data with an Apple iPhone app, a branded on-domain community or a series of distributed widgets.

KickApps' community platform serves as a centralized CMS for both content and social experiences, meaning that each widget built within the App Studio can carry social data with it—such as comments, ratings or tags. Both the content and the experience around that content can be replicated in any new environment.

More importantly, data about those interactions all is fed into to a single interface regardless of where the widgets have been installed. This allows brands to take back data about their customer relationships that is typically co-opted by the social networks.

KickApps for IBM WebSphere Commerce

In today's online environment, retailers have to be visible where their customers are interacting online. Increasingly, that means establishing a presence across the social web, delivering retail experiences to customers far beyond the boundaries of a stand-alone corporate website.

To help address this need, IBM has partnered with KickApps to integrate their award-winning social publishing platform and App Studio with WebSphere Commerce.

The KickApps App Studio for WebSphere Commerce allows anyone—including non-programmers—to create rich social commerce applications that all pull from the same centralized data, making it easy to distribute a social experience that spans multiple platforms, and to extend your brand to all corners of the social web.

The combined solution allows retailers to easily and smoothly deploy social commerce experiences to their affiliate partners and social networks, and among Internet properties. With KickApps for WebSphere Commerce, retailers can:

- Extend the brand experience and discussions to places where customers and prospects are already interacting around the Internet.
- Effectively capitalize on new channels to promote brands and products.
- Exploit social networks to improve consumer reach and drive traffic to their website.
- Control the brand experience centrally and easily.
- Help increase customer satisfaction and loyalty.

For example, if a consumer was to rate or post a review of a product on an App Studio-powered Facebook fan page, that same review could be immediately available on the retailer's mobile phone app or branded domain.

No technical experience is required to use KickApps' solution effectively. With the KickApps' drag-and-drop interface, retailers can create showcase product galleries, video players and many other types of socially-enabled apps. You can integrate data and content from your product database and from external sources. For example, it's extremely easy to build a custom widget that displays products from your catalog alongside product mentions from Twitter or related videos from your official YouTube channel.
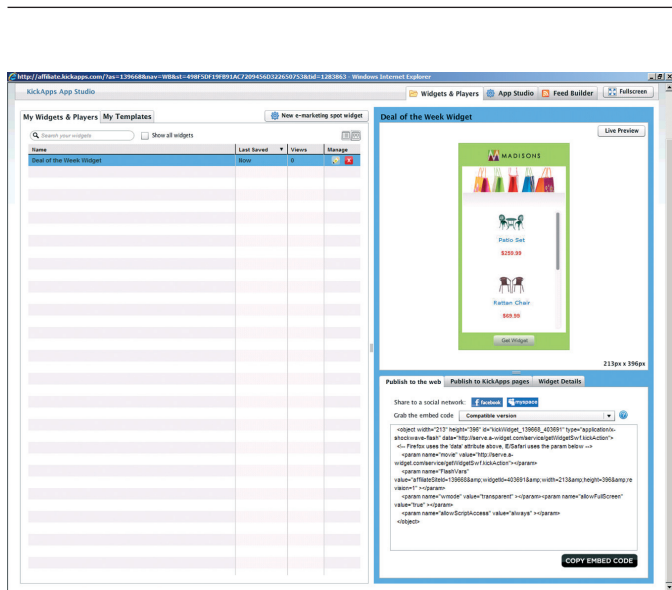

Figure 4: WebSphere Commerce customers can store previously created widgets as templates, allowing them to quickly produce and share out variations.

Widgets can also be easily customized to match your brand's specifications. KickApps for WebSphere Commerce enables marketers to quickly change widget skins, look and feel to accommodate branding and campaign needs.

Support for Flash

Adobe's Open Source Media Framework (OSMF) is integrated into the App Studio. All KickApps video players support the ecosystem of OSMF plug-ins that have and will be built on the framework. The App Studio will give you a virtually unlimited number of Flash apps and functionality that you can plug-in to every custom video you build using KickApps.

Furthermore, the Apps Studio automatically converts widgets into both Flash and HyperText Markup Language Version 5 (HTML5) from a single authoring environment, with no additional coding required, allowing retailers to build social commerce functionality into apps.

Integrating WebSphere Commerce and KickApps to extend the brand experience

WebSphere Commerce provides a RESTful (Representational State Transfer) framework that supports web service feeds. WebSphere Commerce remote widgets use the RESTful framework to retrieve dynamic information as an Atom feed for display in e-Marketing Spot widgets, wish list widgets and gift registry widgets. Business users can use KickApps App Studio to create the remote widgets and specify the corresponding Atom feed that provides the dynamic content to display in the remote widgets.

WebSphere Commerce has provided a smooth integration between IBM Management Center for WebSphere Commerce and KickApps App Studio, to streamline the remote widget creation. Business users and marketers can connect directly from the marketing tool user interface in Management Center to the KickApps App Studio to create e-Marketing Spot remote widgets for any e-Marketing Spots with no additional sign on. For example, to create a "Deals of the Week" e-Marketing Spot remote widget, business users open the "Deals of the Week" e-Marketing Spot in the marketing tool, and simply click the "Get Widget" button in the properties page to launch the KickApps App Studio.

Figure 5: The user interface for the "Deals of the Week" e-Marketing Spot in the IBM Management Center for WebSphere Commerce marketing tool.

WebSphere Commerce provides in the KickApps App Studio a set of widget templates that are available only to IBM customers. The templates are specifically designed to display WebSphere Commerce remote widgets for e-Marketing Spots, wish lists and gift registries.
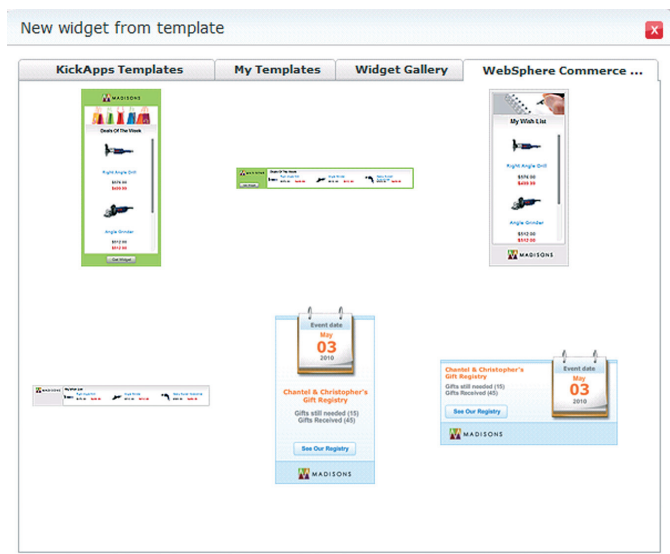

Figure 6: Widget templates in the KickApps App Studio that are available to IBM customers only.

In the KickApps App Studio, business users can create "Deals of the Week" remote widgets from scratch or from one of the e-Marketing Spot widget templates provided as the starting point. If the "Deals of the Week" widget is built from the e-Marketing Spot widget template, a proper e-Marketing Spot Atom feed will be configured for the remote widget through the pre-built integration between WebSphere Commerce and KickApps. Business users can enhance the look and feel of the "Deals of the Week" remote widget tailored to their brand, using the App Studio tool.
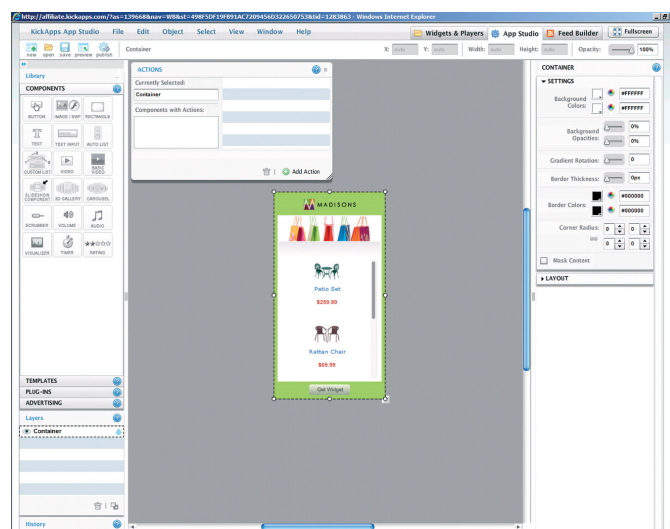

Figure 7: The KickApps App Studio user interface, which allows retailers to customize the look, functionality and components included in their e-Marketing Spot widgets.

When the widget is ready to be shared, it can be posted on social networking sites such as Facebook and MySpace with one simple click. Alternatively, it can be distributed to third-party websites such as corporate blogs, content or partner sites, using the embedded HTML code provided with the remote widget. Changes made in the marketing tool for the "Deals of the Week" e-Marketing Spot will refresh in real time what users see in the "Deals of the Week" remote widget. There is no need to manually distribute new content.

Figure 8: An example of a KickApps-powered e-Marketing Spot widget integrated into a retailer's official blog.

Business users are empowered to use the Management Center marketing tool to manage both the marketing content for the online store and the marketing content for the external websites displayed in remote widgets.

Conclusion

Extending the brand experience to affiliates and partner websites, social networks, blogs or anywhere on the web where it is relevant is truly the new way to do business. Your customers, the consumers you are targeting, spend a lot of time on those properties and that's where your brand needs to be promoting itself and where it is relevant to do so. With IBM WebSphere Commerce and KickApps, you can easily create remote widgets that you, the business user, can publish where it makes the most sense for your customers. You can even enable the widgets to be shared by your customers with their friends wherever they choose to do so, giving you even more visibility with very little effort or cost.
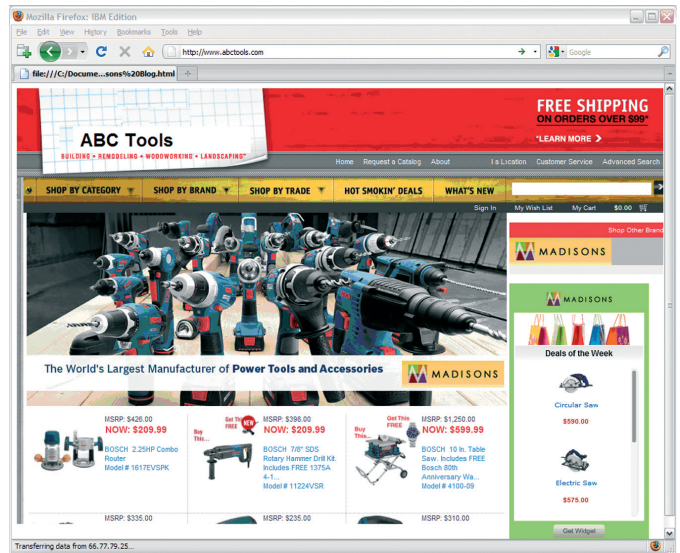

Figure 9: An example of a KickApps-powered e-Marketing Spot widget integrated into a non-branded website.

For more information

To learn more about IBM WebSphere Commerce Version 7.0, Feature Pack 1 enhancements, please contact your IBM marketing representative or IBM Business Partner, or visit the following website:
ibm.com/software/genservers/commerce/socialcommerce/

To learn more about KickApps' social publishing platform, or to sign up for a 30-day free trial of the service, please visit the following website: www.kickapps.com

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[1] Source: Experian Hitwise, "Facebook reaches Top Ranking in US," March 15, 2010, http://weblogs.hitwise.com/heather-dougherty/2010/03/facebook_reaches_top_ranking_i.html

[2] Source: Facebook, "500 Million Stories," Mark Zuckerberg, July 21, 2010, http://blog.facebook.com/blog.php?post=409753352130

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