Case Study

Outstanding in the Field Relies on Cloud Brigade to Run Ticket Sales Smoothly

https://outstandinginthefield.com/

An adventure, a destination, an experience.

Summary

Customer Since 2014

Global, Headquartered in Santa Cruz, CA

Food Service/Hospitality, Small Business

Jim Denevan, CEO and Founder

Founded in 1999, Privately Held

Challenge

Outstanding in the Field launches its annual ticket sales campaign each year on the first day of spring. The website is overwhelmed with hits from tens of thousands of people on that one day. The challenge has always been to meet the demand and ensure that ticket sales go smoothly.

Benefits

- Resolved ticket sales bottlenecks to ensure sales don't come to a grinding halt, frustrating loyal customers
- Ensure smooth collection of revenues by sizing web resources for extremely high traffic volumes
- Made the website more manageable by staff
- Created a better overall customer experience
- Provide IT skills not found in-house

About Outstanding in the Field

Outstanding in the Field was founded by Jim Denevan in 1999 as a radical alternative to the conventional dining experience. Rather than source ingredients for a restaurant, the company brings the restaurant to the source. A culinary caravan sets up tables set in vineyards, beaches, meadows, fishing docks, and city streets in addition to a long list of organic and sustainable farms. The intention is to connect diners to the origins of their food while celebrating the hardworking hands that make that food possible.

Background

Outstanding in the Field hosts nearly 100 events each year. To build excitement for the annual tour and symbolically celebrate the spring planting season, the company launches ticket sales for all the dinners on the first day of spring. With more than 100,000 enthusiastic followers, Outstanding in the Field experiences a massive surge of visitors to its website on this day. Given that the company takes in about 75% of its annual revenues on that single day, it's crucial to support the spike of web traffic and ensure a smooth process for ticket sales.

Business Challenges

- **Business Bottlenecks -** Cloud Brigade overcame limitations in the ticketing system that hampered sales
- **Inefficient Systems and Processes -** Multiple iterations of websites and ticketing systems failed to meet sales volume requirements
- **Skills and Staffing Gaps -** The company has limited in-house IT resources
- **Antiquated Technology -** The original ticketing system and website were in dire need of modernization

Why Cloud Brigade

When Outstanding in the Field first engaged with Cloud Brigade in 2014, the existing custom-built website and e-commerce system were crumbling under the weight of customer demand. There have been several attempts to redesign the website and deploy a supportive ticket sales system over the years, including an application development effort by Cloud Brigade. With the latest refresh that began in 2019, Cloud Brigade introduced new cloud-based solutions and load-testing technology that finally seem to have resolved the web load issues. All along, Outstanding in the Field had the confidence that Cloud Brigade could deliver where others had failed.

"Chris [Miller] and the team at Cloud Brigade helped recognize issues with the site that we would not have seen ourselves and it was very valuable to us. Chris is always our go-to person to call whenever there's an issue. We know and trust that he understands our business and what is going to happen. Cloud Brigade is tenacious in resolving nagging issues."

– Seth Heitzenrater, Customer Service Manager, Outstanding in the Field

The Ticket Sales Process is Enormously Complex

Across more than two decades, world renowned chef and artist Jim Denevan has built a huge following for his experiential on-location dinners. People anxiously await the day when tickets are available for the tour events. Tickets go on sale the first day of spring, symbolic of renewal and the start of planting season for the host farms and vineyards. On that day, tens of thousands of tickets are sold over the web and Outstanding in the Field takes in three-quarters of its revenue for the entire year.

A failure of the ticket sales process, or even bad customer experiences such as slow page loading of the website, could be disastrous for the company. The challenge of steering so much traffic to the ticketing system on a single day is very taxing on the e-commerce technology. Few platforms are designed to sustain good performance during a spike of overwhelming simultaneous usage. Over the years, Outstanding in the Field has worked with numerous vendors who have attempted to overcome the challenges in one way or another.

A major consideration is that Outstanding in the Field wants to control the website or content management system where information about its events is hosted and displayed. The backend ticketing system can be a separate but integrated system so that the event browsing and ticket purchase procedures are seamless for customers. One iteration of the system had the event content hosted on WordPress and the ticket purchase process being handed off to Vendini.

In 2019, Outstanding in the Field went through yet another iteration of its website and ticket sales process. A third party developer created the front-end website but failed to thoroughly test it. Cloud Brigade was tasked with taking over the project to resolve bottlenecks and get everything to work as needed.

Technology

- Software: WordPress, LoadStorm
- PaaS: Kinsta
- IaaS: AWS

Services

- Cloud Infrastructure: Amazon EC2 (Elastic Compute), RDS (Relational Database Service), Simple Storage Service (S3), and CloudFront
- Application Development: Website and e-commerce ticketing system
- Systems Support: Technical Consulting, Load Testing

Partners

Load-Testing Proves to Be Key to Resolving Issues

Cloud Brigade migrated the new website to a managed service in the cloud. "We were confident this service could handle the load," says Chris Miller, CEO of Cloud Brigade. "We leveraged our partner Kinsta for this high-speed WordPress managed hosting service based on Linux containers, and this allows us to scale up or down their server resources at the click of a button." The built-in scalability of the cloud ensures that massive amounts of resources are quickly available on the first day of ticket sales. Then they can be scaled back when no longer needed to minimize hosting expenses.

The next step was to load-test the end-to-end process of having customers come onto the website, select their events, and then purchase tickets. Cloud Brigade partnered with a company called LoadStorm to develop simulations of customer behavioral patterns that would hit the website and backend ticketing system.

"We created recordings of these user journeys within the website, which were different variations of how people might shop for tickets," says Miller. "We translated these recordings into test cases within the LoadStorm platform. We did a baseline test to establish that everything was functioning properly. Then we would perform tests with increasing numbers of 'users' on certain breakpoints for the thresholds to be able to see how hard we could push the site. This helped us to learn when and where it would break so we could address those areas."

Through this process, Cloud Brigade identified some potential issues with the ticketing vendor. "We were able to resolve those issues in advance to ensure that when ticket sales happen, they can deal with the load. With our tests, we pushed their website well beyond the previously known threshold for the number of simultaneous users," says Miller. "We identified problems that would have negatively affected ticket sales on the first day of the sales event. This helped to solve problems they would have encountered that weren't readily apparent otherwise."

These critical simulations led to a better understanding of traffic levels and patterns, which enabled Cloud Brigade to forecast how much traffic the site might get, identify potential bottlenecks, and build the system to accommodate the anticipated traffic. Now Outstanding in the Field is confident its systems can smoothly support the next round of ticket sales that are so critical to the company's revenue generation.

"One thing I love about working with Cloud Brigade – and we work very hands-on with them – is that they take the time to explain to us what the problems are. That educates me and I can then educate the other people in the company and that way we don't make the same mistake again or we can identify it ourselves. We have a great relationship with Cloud Brigade and they have been a good partner for us over the years."

– Seth Heitzenrater, Customer Service Manager, Outstanding in the Field

Looking to the Future

Cloud Brigade will continue to support Outstanding in the Field's challenging IT needs and look for ways to optimize the cost of the cloud infrastructure in support of the event marketing and ticket sales processes.