

The story behind one of the newest IT innovations in estate agency, Virtualneg, is an unusual one.

Paul Stefka was embarking on a Master's degree in a new subject, Interactive Production, when he got a call from a friend who knew of Stefka's extensive background in IT – he has worked on Government projects and also, rather tellingly, designed successful IT products for children.

Website

The call came from Darren Allett, an area manager for a firm of estate agents called Bridges in north-east Hampshire: "Darren said they were struggling with their website and with their IT generally and could I go and take a look. I started by spending a day to help out and was then asked for an evaluation."

Stefka saw a situation familiar to many similarly-sized estate agents – Bridges had four branches, is growing, and is proactive in its area. "One moment the IT guy was fielding calls about the website and the next minute, he was off to fix a jammed printer in one of the branches. I had originally been commissioned just to look

at their website but soon realised I couldn't separate it from the rest of the agency's operations. It wasn't just a matter of solving the problem that initially annoyed them, whereby their properties were uploading to a portal but not updating."

Stefka went away and wrote a 34-page proposal to build a web-enabled, bespoke system which he felt suited the business's specific needs. For example, Bridges at the time ran a call-centre type operation to handle customer queries and it was important that its staff were able to access all information from the branches instantly. Instantly means exactly that – new applicants pop up on the database the second they have registered, so that they can immediately be matched, by the system, to properties

Documents

The proposal also included a new website, and generation of all standard letters, particulars, contracts, advertisements and forms, diary management and follow-up, and staff commissions. Back-up and back office support was an important part of the proposition, with trouble-shooting done remotely and all properties automatically



Paul Stefka, standing, with Tony Raffermati of Bridges

uploaded and updated by Virtualneg's own server on the agency's behalf.

But what distinguished it all was – and is – its sheer simplicity: "I came across one person at Bridges who had used the previous software system for two years but

still didn't know how to send something to print, as it was a job he did very rarely and it wasn't obvious how to do it.

"With our system, I wanted anyone to be able to sit in front of a screen and sort out very quickly how it all worked even



if they had never seen it before – and by quickly, I mean within a minute or two. It's designed to be exceptionally user-friendly, with no hidden buttons."

Stefka worked with Bridges on the project, which he simultaneously wrote up for his dissertation: "Although the work I had done applied to Bridges, I also looked at the industry as a whole. The concept is that it has been tried and tested but that it can be bespoke for any agent."

Evolving

The dissertation won Stefka a distinction but he continued to work on the system for Bridges until June last year: "I tried

to perfect it but it will never be finished – it will constantly evolve. Estate agency changes and so does technology." By June, however, he felt confident enough to launch his product to other agencies, and to date he has eight customers.

These include two agents abroad, in Majorca and Minorca, and six in this country. Every version of Virtualneg is different. For example, the Majorcan agency lets out holiday homes, so the system encompasses that.

Another agency, Richard Worth, operates a strong lettings business, so their Virtualneg system includes a lettings marketing system and, shortly,

a complete lettings management system.

One of Stefka's most enjoyable challenges was going into Barons estate agents in Basingstoke, Hampshire, where this successful firm had worked up a strong reputation for customer service but had just one computer: "I thought it would be like going in with a highly charged racing bicycle only to find that the client didn't understand the concept of a bicycle, but in fact I learned a lot from them."

"Because they had been operating quite traditionally, I picked up a lot about how agency itself works, and because Barons had no preconceived notions, they came up with three or four really good ideas. They had been worried that their guys would stop selling and spend all day on their computers, but that hasn't happened."

Advertising

Some of the ideas suggested by Stefka's agency clients were obvious to an estate agent but not to anyone in IT: "One wanted to know why they couldn't simply right-click on a property and send it off for press advertising. It seemed like a good idea, so I incorporated it."

However, there are some features that Virtualneg doesn't incorporate.

"We don't do text alerts, because I am not really sure they add any value. The feedback we've had is that people find it very annoying to be alerted by their phone

to a not-very-good picture of a house on it. However, we haven't had any requests for the service yet and that may change as screen technology on mobile phones improves."

Only one of Stefka's customers wants 360-degree virtual tours and Stefka is a little sceptical about those too as he believes they can distort the shape of rooms. He does, however, like the Metropix 3D walkthroughs. But essentially, as he says, he will do what the customer wants.

Approach

Cost-wise, agents will have to make their own comparisons: Virtualneg costs an average of £2,500 to £3,000 per office, including set-up and training, plus £250 per office monthly for full support and hosting services.

The approach seems popular among the customers so far. Tony Raffermati, managing director of Bridges, positively raves about the system and, unsolicited, was the one to tell The Negotiator about it: "Compared to our old software, there is simply no comparison. This is a breath of fresh air. Our staff used to spend hours on helplines trying to fix the many niggling problems we faced day in and day out. Virtualneg has proved amazingly reliable."

Another client, Richard Worth, says he feels that the Virtualneg team has become an extension of his own business.

Stefka's business, which has so far survived on his own skills and a small network of freelance friends, is now poised for growth. He has recruited an office manager and is now looking for a programmer: "I feel we have got to the stage where we are ready for a big sales drive."

Well, he passed his exam – so who knows where this master of the universe could take his IT proposition next.

Details: 0845 064 5588
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Academic exercise

Paul Stefka was doing his Master's degree when he was asked to take a look at an estate agent's IT set-up. The result so far? A dissertation that won him a distinction and eight satisfied customers

