

PHILLIPS

de PURY & COMPANY

THE REQUIREMENT:

Phillips De Pury, the London based high-end Contemporary Art Auction House, needed to replace the existing auction room set up as part of a new look. Tom Campbell of the Operations Department states the issues faced:

"We approached Compsoft needing a unique piece of software for display at the front of our sale room, providing important real-time information about the lots to clients bidding in the room. We also needed the ability to upload images into the software (previously we had wasted time building PowerPoint presentations) and create our own "auction sessions" with different information on view."

Previously staff had presented information from two disparate laptops on to two video screens, using images from the website to show the lots on one screen and, on the second, the value of bids as they were placed in multiple currencies. As part of the revamp, Phillips De Pury had invested in one large screen and needed one solution to replace the two functions.

The final requirement was the most challenging! It needed to be ready for a highly publicised launch on Friday 12th February.

THE DEVELOPMENT:

Compsoft saw three possibilities: an app that opened as a web-page that could post images from the existing website (where photos already resided) and included a neat little window that was controllable by an operator that manually increased the bid values; a Silverlight application, built using the .NET framework that was again browser-based but would benefit from a stylish design and quality functionality; or, thirdly, a desk-top application built using Microsoft's Windows Presentation Foundation (WPF) that would not rely on a network or the internet, but be managed from the host computer.

A Compsoft Workshop was undertaken to explore the precise functions that would be required by the auction house, how it was to look, what the variables would be and how a user would interact with the app to set up an auction. Reflecting on the Workshop process Tom commented:

“They placed emphasis on the fact that it was important for them to gather as much information as possible at the initial stages: they made sure that they had all the questions answered and I left the meeting satisfied that they understood our requirements in detail.”

The result of this consultation between key stakeholders at Phillips De Pury and representatives from Compsoft’s development, account management and commercial teams was a detailed specification that became the blueprint for the development process.

Through investigation it was identified that a browser-based solution could prove problematic. Browser specific issues that would incur included the operator having to upload the images for each auction one file at a time, and the restriction of use of the Function keys. (The incumbent app used the Function keys to incrementally increase bids by specified amounts, for example one strike of the F1 key may have increased the bid by £10, the F4 key by £100 and so on.) Browsers typically use the Function keys for standard features like ‘Help’ or ‘Find’, so an alternative means for increasing bids would have been required although not wanted by the customer. Other problems with using a browser included the ability to save each auction (a group of preselected images, a selection of currencies and the exchange rate) and the reliability of the used browser to correctly display the visual elements (lot images, logos and text) in the right proportion.

Another consideration had been to develop the application in Microsoft’s Silverlight technology. However, while the ‘back-end’ of the system would have been written in .NET with high quality functionality, the use of a browser to display the images would still compromise the reliability of presentation in the same way any other browser / web-based solution would.

Ultimately Compsoft recommended the use of Microsoft’s WPF, a part of the .NET development framework, because it would fully support the functional requirements of the application.

Because WPF plugs straight into the computer’s graphics card, the application would have greater control over the visualisation of the imagery in the application; photos of each lot could be rendered in the correct proportion, the company logo would also be right. Additionally, commands could be

set so that if prices were to escalate to require 10 or more digits, the font could be automatically resized to fit the greater number of characters without destroying the presentation.

The initial development phase was to create the management control; a window where the operator is able to prepare the auction. The key components were a feature to batch import a large quantity of images, currency conversion settings (defining which currency was to be used and the desired rate), and the Function key settings. The configuration of these settings define an auction and can be saved for recall at a later time or, as at Phillips De Pury, for duplication on a back up computer to ensure that in the event of computer failure the auction can continue.

Another feature that was developed in to the system was using a hot-key to fade the on-screen image to a full size logo in the event that the auctioneer pauses the proceedings, the operator can go back to the auction where it was left with no loss of information to the lot's bid price.

THE SOLUTION

The finished application is a very tidy functional solution that was used at the much publicised Contemporary Art Auction held on February 12, 2010 at the London headquarters in Howick Place. On the night, 43 lots were up for auction with the sales grossing approximately £6.1 million.

Pleased with the speedy development and the ease-of-use, Phillips De Pury's Tom Campbell said:

"The software works perfectly and meets every standard outlined in the specification. We have now used it during several auctions and have been complimented on its visual design. The control interface is also straight forward and easy to use, and it has been great to free up the administration time previously spent on manually creating power-point presentations."