

Westcoast

Developing an innovative approach to PIM for distributors

When IT distributor Westcoast set out to implement their first PIM system, they discovered that not only was their 400,000 strong product catalogue too complicated for them to develop a solution in-house, but it was also too much for established PIM systems, which were designed for other industries operating on different standards. They turned to Pimberly to find a more flexible solution that was specially geared toward distributors.

"Getting useable data from our vendors can be challenging," Westcoast's senior business architect Nick Gushlow told us. "We often have to get our product information from third parties, then triage multiple sources of data into our internal systems, which handle a product catalogue that includes over 400,000 SKUs with very different data models – everything from cables with three or four attributes to printers with over 100."

Unsurprisingly, this made it difficult for Westcoast to get consistent, accurate data for their customers, as the challenge of getting parsable data on the system at all was time consuming enough to preclude any curation or data management. "It was only when we started getting into scenarios where we had to provide data for different customers in different formats that we found lots of people had developed different practices without IT knowing about it. What we needed was a system that could pull all those practices together and make sure that we were noticing issues with data before our customers pointed them out."

Finding a PIM solution for distributors

With the backing of the Westcoast board, Nick started meeting with leading PIM vendors. "I had a look at the big market names and the typical top right quadrant of the Gartner report, but PIM to the majority of people is about manufacturing. The systems are designed around the idea that you've built the products and have one true source of input that you want everyone to use as gospel. In the distribution world, that's not the case at all. We need to be able to pull in multiple strands of data from multiple places, often for the same product, and then make a decision about which data we're going to output where. And often there are data licensing restrictions that mean that we can show certain data on our website but we can't give that data to customers, for instance. That was our biggest issue and I couldn't solve it with anyone."

Finally, Nick met with the team from Pimberly, who were looking for companies who'd be willing to beta test their new PIM solution. "It was an early version of the software, but I was blown away," said Nick. "I had no doubt in my mind that when we moved forward, we wanted to be involved in testing."

Convincing the board

"The fact that the Pimberly team came in and said 'we can make our product do what you need it to' was what really convinced everyone," Nick told us. Because Pimberly was still in development, Westcoast were able to request that the dev team added features that supported their specific workflow.

Working with...



In a nutshell...

Who are they?

Westcoast Limited are the UK's number one distributor for many IT brands, and are consistently ranked in the Sunday Times Top Track of the 100 Largest Privately Owned UK Companies. Westcoast has also been ranked 10th in a list of the fastest growing private companies in Europe according to Europe 500.

What did they need?

A PIM solution that would allow them to manage multiple strands going to multiple locations, and restricted by various different licensing agreements.

How did we help?

Westcoast were one of the first users of Pimberly, and we worked with them to scope out what functionality was needed, and add custom features that met Westcoast's unique requirements.

What were the benefits?

- Greater visibility over data and the ability to proactively curate third party data.
- An easy, visual workflow for editing data in each product profile.
- The ability to mix and match data sources within a product profile, and to filter where the information is outputted to based on data licensing agreements.
- More efficient product data management.

Developing a new approach to PIM

Nick was impressed with what he'd seen of Pimberly so far, and Westcoast's complex product catalogue, tight turnaround times and strict data licensing contracts meant that it was an ideal testing ground for the system, allowing the Pimberly development team to see what was needed to tackle the most pressing challenges faced by distributors and adjust the software accordingly. New features such as handling multiple inbound channels or filtering attributes within data models were tested by the Westcoast team and, once they'd been approved by the end users, were added to the final Pimberly release.

"The development team really went above and beyond," Nick told us. "When I said that I wanted to take four different datasheets about a single product and be able to choose which datasheet was used in which outbound channel, the guys sat there and said, 'Well, what about if we go right down to the spec line and you can choose which datasheet to use for each spec?' That sounded like a pipe dream, but they went off and a couple of weeks later they came back with that functionality. They were delivering not only what I wanted, but at times far above what my expectations were – and all that functionality is now included as standard in Pimberly, which is amazing."

Introducing PIM to the business

Once work was complete, winning the product team – who'd previously been working in Excel – over to Pimberly was "actually pretty easy. The guys running our product data team, who were going to have to use it day in, day out, had no issues at all working out how to use the system and what they needed to do, in part because Pimberly is so intuitive."

He explained: "A lot of PIM systems give you a tree of options that just goes on forever, and then each screen is muddled with a lot of options. I'm a big believer that software shouldn't need a manual. You should be able to guide yourself through it, and if the software can't guide you toward what you should be doing, then the software was designed wrong in the first place. And there have been very few instances of anyone getting stuck in Pimberly. In fact, in some cases it's so clean that you think 'did something not load on that page?' and then you realise that no, it's just easing you through the process."

Pimberly's intuitive interface meant that the Westcoast product team could get to grips with it quickly, despite having no experience of a formal PIM system. "That was a big thing for us," Nick explained, "because without that experience, it's not like you've got a reference point to go 'I'm looking for X that I know will let me take the data and translate it'. That knowledge just doesn't exist, so be using very visual tools like you do in Pimberly is great – dragging and dropping links between outputs and the data model for example, has made life so much easier."

Now that their product data team are comfortable with Pimberly's data management functions, Nick and the team plan to roll out projects based on its other capabilities. "Pimberly has a wonderful workflow creation system within it, and we'd like to use that to improve links between the product management and product data teams, so product management are doing some of the earlier uploads of work, and then the product data team can focus on curation and publishing rather than gathering."

The biggest benefit of Pimberly, though, has been greater visibility over the data they have, and the ability to deliver it in whatever format is needed. "Pretty much every project that the governance board assigns my team has a data requirement. And the data requirements for all those projects are different, so you've got to have a new format covering a new or different subset of our catalogue, and it's been fantastic using Pimberly to get that data out – before we'd have just given everyone the same data. I couldn't recommend Pimberly – the product or the team – highly enough."



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Nick Gushlow,
Senior Business Architect, Westcoast

"All the people, on the Pimberly and Westcoast sides, came out of the development meetings and actually felt that they'd had an enjoyable day – we all got along fabulously and were able to be honest not just about internal issues that might cause problems with the data, but about what they were proposing to us, and that's a great place to be in."

Nick Gushlow,
Senior Business Architect, Westcoast

