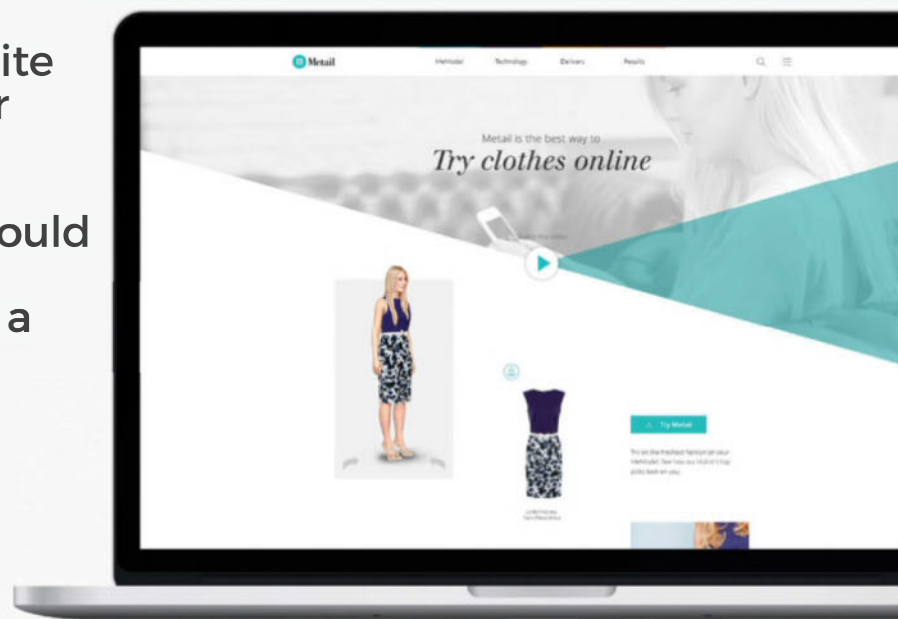


Dressed for *Success*

When eRetail pioneers Metal demanded a website to stylishly sell its browser to buyer technology, the challenge landed on Propeller's runway. Would fashion disasters be averted to provide a perfect fit?



When it comes to buying goods online, it's safe to say the market for fashion is certainly booming. Style-conscious shoppers who once flocked to the high street for new outfits are moving more and more towards a more virtual dose of retail therapy. In the UK alone it is estimated that internet sales of jeans, shirts, tops and skirts will be worth a staggering £19 billion by 2019, offering a mere hint at what the global value could rise to.

All this of course defies any initial fears that the very personal requirements inherent to purchasing new clothes would see the trade struggle to find a home within eCommerce. The obvious benefit to buying in-store has always been the tactility associated with seeing, touching and crucially trying garments on in person. Any alternative would always seem like a leap of faith, no matter how good the returns policies might be. So with retailers looking to develop more effective ways of engaging customers, solutions such as Metail's MeModel are using algorithm-powered technology to bring the fitting room to browsers and smartphones.

By processing measurements and certain physical characteristics, this futuristic service for allowing shoppers to try before they buy already claims to convert visitor sales by 22% and reduce order returns by 5%. So with Metail clearly going places, the company approached UK agency Propeller to give its web marketing a makeover with a brand-new promotional website. Boasting over 15 years of online branding experience within a multi-disciplinary team of 70-plus digital experts, Propeller is no stranger to partnering with leading eCommerce, hospitality and luxury brands. "Frustrated with their previous website and two separate blogs, for fashion and tech, Metail were in need of a unifying website that could bring together all these elements," explains Propeller's Digital Brand Strategy Director, Stephanie Niven. "The site had to be easy to update and manage by their in-house team so the brand could continue to evolve and grow over time." Keen to translate the client's mission "to create and empower everyone's online body identity" into a

“Solutions such as Metail’s MeModel are using algorithm-powered technology to bring the fitting room to browsers and smartphones”

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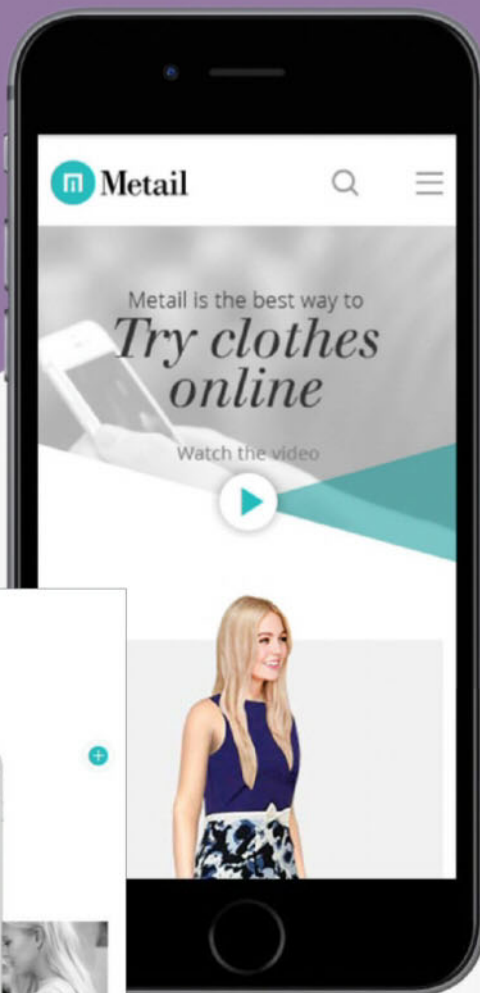
Project duration
5 months

No. of
people involved
5

Total man hours
250



Getting the Metail experience right on mobile was crucial



user-friendly and interactive experience, it was time to strike a pose...

First impressions

As you might expect from two teams with a shared appreciation of online innovation, the project began with mutual excitement. Propeller were understandably pleased to be partnering with a client that was driven by design, technology and this desire to merge the gap between the online and offline experience. "The MeModel product that Metail has created instantly inspired us, tapping into our own drive to innovate and push the boundaries within the digital space," begins Niven. "Our design and development team really embraced the project and the brand to create something with the same level of creativity and ingenuity as Metail's MeModel."

During initial conversations about how this would be achieved, the tone was set for open dialogue and a collaborative way of working that would begin with a workshop. "The Metail team visited our Design and Development hub in Warwickshire where Propeller were able to introduce them to the broader team and specifically those who would play a part in the design and development of the new website," adds Simon Shahrivari, Head of Front-End Development. "The workshop gave both teams the opportunity to run through the initial user flows that the Metail team had proposed and the user interactions they wanted to achieve. Refining and giving clarity to the website from the offset, ensuring the customer experience was at the forefront of the project." These early sessions would elaborate on Metail's desire to replace its out-dated dotcom with a mobile-first, B2B site that focused the user journey with information rich content and imagery for generating sales and new partners. "We chose Basecamp to manage our communications and we used this for daily queries, checklists and in some cases content delivery," explains Lara Berra, Digital Project Manager. "We also reviewed the project progress in our weekly calls where we had the space to address bigger questions about the site and discuss content delivery."

browser do the hard work for us."

This method took an animated GIF from 9MB down to a 200kb jpg and still allowed enough control with only a single asset being uploaded in the CMS. With each of the animation blocks being editable in WordPress, the developers needed to provide the ability to set how many frames would appear and the duration for each animation, in case the folks at Metail ever wanted to update an image. "This was as simple as adding a couple of editable text fields letting them set the required information, and detailing what it was doing. We output this information onto data fields placed on the div, and targeted those with CSS generated with a SCSS mixing."

Optimising animations

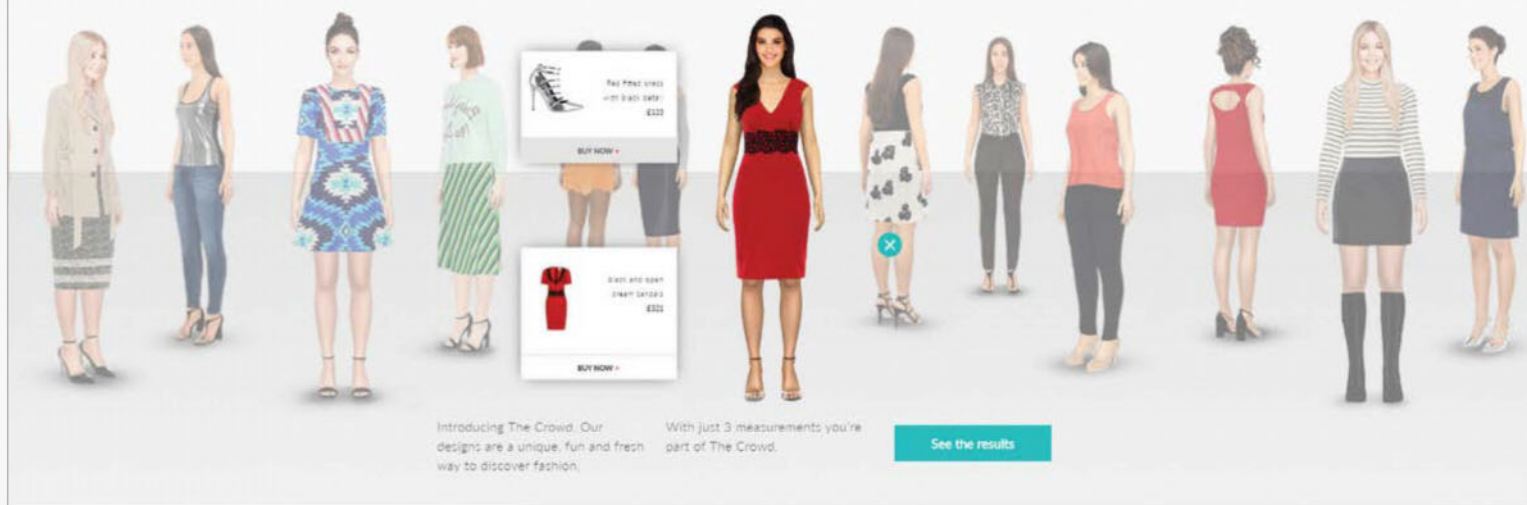
A big back-end challenge on the project, according to Senior Front-End Developer Callum Williams, was the animation work. The coders needed to find a way to make them more lightweight than images or video would permit, so how was this potential front-end headache alleviated? "After some investigation into animation and putting together example demos (<http://bit.ly/2fqglnR>) we identified CSS keyframe step animation as the obvious technique. For each sequence, we would create a horizontal

filmstrip-style image and hide the overflow within a fixed viewport. We would then animate the position of the image using CSS frame-by-frame step animation, creating the illusion of a moving image. This is fairly straightforward until you consider the site has to be responsive. Resizing the image based on screensize became difficult, as the overflow would have to be explicitly set at each resolution. The solution was to make the image vertical, meaning we could set image width to 100% and have the

Styling inspiration

With Metail's own in-house design team already strong and digitally savvy, they had a very clear vision of how their brand and message needed to be conveyed online, providing the initial concept. This was then moved across to the Propeller team for refining ideas and working on the site interactivity and user experience. "We were responsible for creating the low-fidelity wireframes for a bulk of the additional areas of the website and this allowed us to gain a complete understanding of how Metail wanted to deliver their content in strategic sections with clear call-to-actions and engaging data analysis," Shahrivari says. "It was

A new way to
Discover fashion



Site Highlight

Senior Front-End Developer Callum Williams reveals what fills the team with pride



“A stand out feature for the site would be the parallax animation at the foot of the MeModel page. It was an interesting challenge to tackle and I think the final result brings something extra to the site. The combination of animations and interactivity site-wide, really drive user interaction and increases the average session time”

important that we also began detailing the interaction ideas for the overall user journey and how we intended to present the content to the user in the most engaging way possible without overwhelming them. The site would be split into four key areas: MeModel, Technology, Delivers and Results. Each of these areas would tell their own story about the Metail experience and we would look to bring information lead graphics, video and team narrative in a deep scrolling, interactive showcase that would entice users to keep discovering more about the Metail brand.”

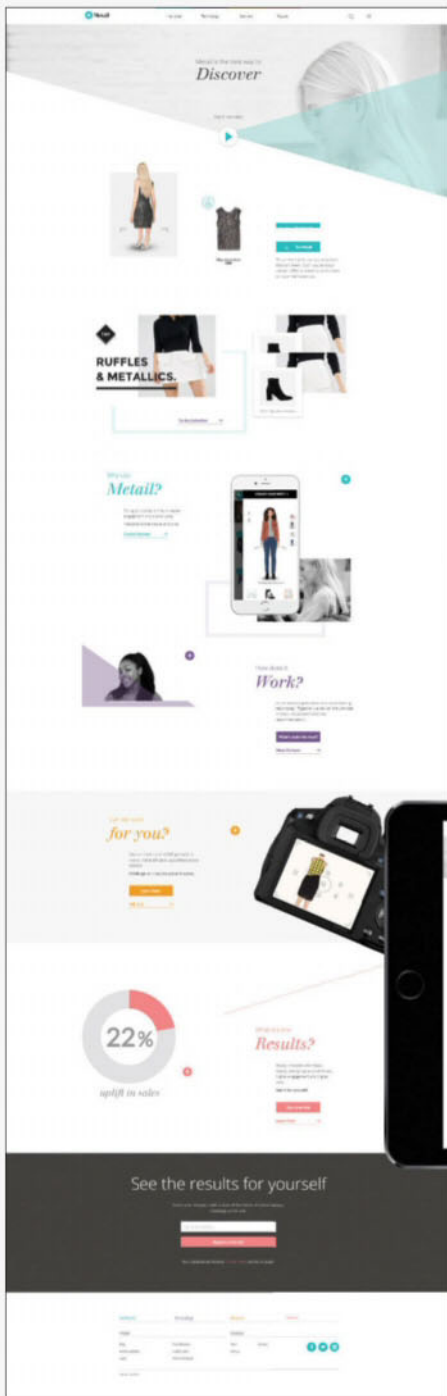
Just as important was ensuring the additional pages followed Metail's design direction from those four key areas and were also executed to Propeller's own high standards. Their design and development teams would work hard to create a build that pushed the boundaries and complemented the design execution. “Once we

had the initial site concept and theme from Metail, we ran through the high-fidelity assets and adapted them to fit within a 12-column grid. This enables the front-end developer to rapidly prototype page layouts that in turn saves on development time. We then looked at pages on the site without a design and designed some of our own concepts based upon Metail's base themes. The team page is a particular highlight of our design.”

Fitting problems

A key requirement from Metail was a backend system capable of a high level of customisation. It was decided that WordPress was an ideal platform in terms of providing the necessary flexibility but also because of the prior experience both parties had using it. “Once we had decided on the platform, the next step was to break

down each page into two groups - bespoke and re-usable modules - and then abstract any core modifiers for each,” explains Senior Front-End Developer Callum Williams. “For example, the Hero banner region has three different layouts across the site, yet the core information displayed is the same. By adding a modifier class to the root of the banner we could change streamline layout changes quickly and easily, enabling the same code to be recycled for all. A similar method to define the colour theming used in each module, adding a colour modifier data-attr on the root element would mean all of the titles, buttons, borders etc inside would take on the colour theme. Identifying these steps early on in development meant the focus could shift primarily on outputting the content, and prototyping the layout.” Propeller's own development experience with WordPress told them



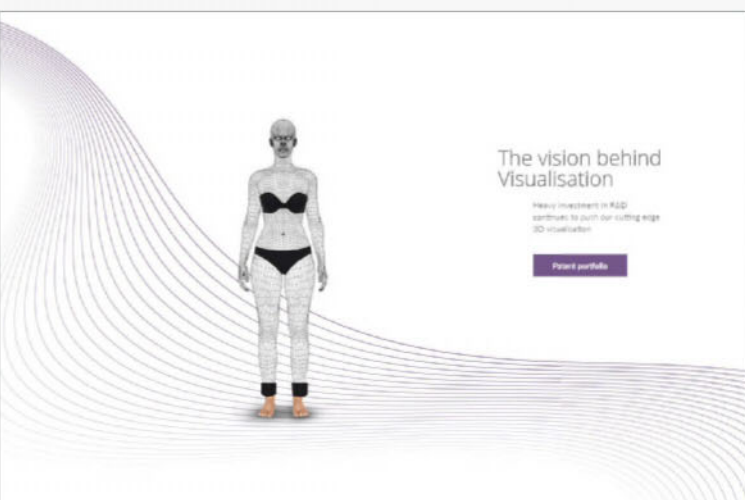
“With experimentation and testing, animated GIFs would be ingeniously replaced with CSS keyframes to significantly slim things down”

that out of the box it can be lacking as an advanced and feature-rich Content Management System, at least to the level they required. Thankfully though, the team had settled on a workaround successfully deployed across other projects that mitigates such limitations. “This can easily be improved by utilising the Advanced Custom Fields Plugin to extend the default capabilities and capture data. At Propeller, we’ve adopted this method of developing WordPress sites over the past couple of years, as it helps us create a quick and simple to use page builder, tailored from scratch, for each client.” A much tougher challenge to solve, however,

was developing the high-level animation sequences dotted throughout the site in a way that wouldn’t compromise page performance. Certain main animation sequences would require storyboarding to better understand how they could be realised within the front-end, before settling on an efficient technical method. “To ensure we can still manage the assets for the sequences from the CMS we identified some options. Animated GIFs and HTML5 video seemed the logical choices but after testing both these methods we felt they weren’t a strong enough solution for performance. Some of the animated GIF sequences

were weighing in at 9MB, which obviously is not acceptable.” With experimentation and testing, animated GIFs would be ingeniously replaced with CSS keyframes to significantly slim things down.

What’s more, the ability to lean on Metail’s own inherent expertise would overcome any additional complexity associated with stipulating animation data when updating images through the CMS. “Metail being a technically minded client meant they would understand the principles of animation. With another client, we may have struggled to explain this functionality.”



The vision behind Visualisation

Heavy investment in R&D continues to push our cutting edge 3D visualisation

Product portfolio

Smooth changeovers

Given a project of this magnitude and the high-level of CMS control that was given to the client, a successful transition phase was crucial to familiarise Metail with their new website. "We organised training workshops with the marketing team at Metail and gave them a comprehensive session on how they would be able to manage content delivery in the backend," explains Head of Front-End Development Simon Shahriveri. "With the Metail team already having experience with the WordPress platform and their

technical experience and knowledge, we could really go into detail and explore the exciting features." It was clearly advantageous for Propeller to be working with a Metail team who already appreciated all the technology that goes behind a website. However, Propeller's commitment to every client means that post-live monitoring and follow-up are as important as the delivery of the project itself. "Once the project management team has completed a project, this then moves over to our dedicated

account management team who really know how to cater to their individual clients' needs," adds Digital Project Manager Lara Berra. "We make sure that the transition between teams is as seamless as possible so that the high level of customer service is maintained throughout. A handover meeting is a great way to start the next phase of the relationship."

Wearing it well

From the very beginning of the project, Metail stipulated a tight deadline to meet a proposed launch for the end of March 2016. This would suggest a three-and-a-half week development timeline, which saw Propeller pull out all the stops to achieve it. "In order to ensure we did not fail to deliver a finished product by our initial deadline, the development team worked tirelessly in the evenings and weekends to reach the deadline," admits Niven. "For a site of this scale, it was definitely a challenging objective to achieve in this timeframe but we continued in our endeavour and never sacrificed on quality. With the initial March release pushed back due to content issues and general tweaks and tuning, the July release was successfully delivered pretty seamlessly."

Upon launch, Propeller would do its own promotions to highlight the project, while continuing to follow Metail's activities and indeed support the client with the

necessary transition training and on-going aftercare. Such a level of dedication to service over what was a concentrated period of time, has thankfully been recognised not just by the client but also the wider web community. "We promoted the website via our social media channels to let our followers know of the work we undertook and how proud we are of the final result," Niven concludes. We continue to keep up to date with Metail's news and interact with the brand via social media. We featured case studies and insight via our partners at the RAR and The Drum to further increase the visibility of the project. There's also a dedicated blog on our website featuring a video to really showcase the animation of the website. Since its go-live, the site has attracted plenty of admirers and attention and has recently received various industry accolades. Among those being awarded Site of the Day over at the CSS Design Awards and also given an Awwwards honourable mention." Dressed for success indeed...

