

CASE STUDY

EMPLOYING NETWORK ADVANTAGE TO SUSTAIN RETAIL LEADERSHIP



When Praktiker first opened its doors in 1991, Greek consumers had never seen anything like it before. A huge store selling everything for the home and garden, from garden plants to power tools and kitchen cabinets.

"We brought the concept of DIY to Greece," says Alkiviadis Manaris, IT Manager, Praktiker Hellas. "For the first decade we had a clear market. There was nothing like us."

Today, Praktiker Hellas remains the number one home improvement retailer in Greece. It has 16 stores, each more than 3,500sqm, and six million customers. It sells direct to consumers and professionals, on-line, by telephone and through its stores. It carries more than 50,000 items.

But Praktiker is no longer alone in the Greek market. Competition is fierce and the retail sector is changing. Consumers can price-check everything. They are more demanding.

"Today, anyone can sell paints or tools," says Mr. Manaris. "Our focus and our unique selling proposition is that we are a one-stop-shop that offers not only a great combination of products and services, but a whole enjoyable experience. We do our best in order to add more and more value to our customers' shopping experience."



UNLOCKING CUSTOMER INSIGHT TO INFORM BUSINESS STRATEGY

Until 2015, the business was part of Germany's Praktiker Group. Many decisions were mandated centrally, including IT investments. Acquisition by Fairfax Financial Holdings of Canada created a new level of independence and the ability to develop strategies from Greece for Greece.

"As a subsidiary we couldn't do much," says Mr. Manaris. "We were forced to adopt global vendors. Independence gave us the freedom to implement our own strategy."

The priority was to virtualise much of the physical IT infrastructure, Mr. Manaris explains, but by 2017, with the incumbent network coming to end of support, a new architecture-based and data-driven strategy began to take shape.

REQUIREMENTS

- High speed Wi-Fi in head office and stores
- Generate the data to inform future retail strategy
- Deliver new value-driven shopping experiences
- Strengthen information security for business, customers and guests
- Flexible and dynamic network architecture to support innovation and growth

SOLUTION

- 802.11ac Indoor & Outdoor APs
- Mobility Controllers
- Aruba Campus Core, Distribution and Edge switches
- ClearPass Policy Manager and Access Control
- AirWave Network Management

OUTCOMES

- Delivers granular detail of customer journey throughout stores
- Guides strategic sales and marketing plans
- Provides platform for new services around mobility, IoT and location-based functionality
- Reduces network total cost of ownership and optimises productivity
- Centralises and unifies management and monitoring of wired and wireless network
- Enables the business to deploy network functionality to new stores in hours not days
- Facilitates business continuity plan to be extended from HQ to all stores
- Lays the foundation for secure and unified home and remote working

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ALKIVIADIS MANARIS
IT MANAGER, PRAKTIKER HELLAS

"We needed to ensure the security of the network and, at the same time, use the network to develop customer insight," says Mr. Manaris. "We recognised that we could use the network as a great indicator of the customer journey, through our stores. At the time we were almost blind."

Hungry to explore new network ideas

Praktiker Hellas included the incumbent in discussions but Mr. Manaris says the team was hungry to explore other options: "We were very open to new ideas."

It soon became clear that the Aruba architecture offered a number of significant advantages. "From the beginning ClearPass and AirWave drew our attention," says Mr. Manaris. "Being able to operate and monitor the network without the need for highly skilled network engineers was very appealing. Aruba's network management tools were exactly what we needed."

Proofs of concept were then set-up featuring Aruba and the incumbent; one store ran the incumbent, another ran on the Aruba LAN switches, a third on the Aruba WLAN. The proof of concept ran for four months.

"Aruba was so much better. It was easier and faster to deploy and with a clear view of who and what was connected to the network. We had the data within three days," says Mr. Manaris. "We never managed to get the incumbent's network access tool to work."



End-to-end management across wired and wireless

Today, Praktiker Hellas has end-to-end Aruba architecture across the entire wired and wireless infrastructure. The deployment kicked off in September 2019 at the Athens head office, with the last store completed in February 2020.

The company has deployed ClearPass for role-based device and user authentication, integrated with its Active Directory database. AirWave Network Management is used as the central point of network monitoring and supervision. Two Aruba 5412R campus core switches have been deployed for the server farm and the LAN, respectively, in the HQ.

The network core in the stores is based on Aruba 3810 L3 switches, while the network access in all locations is provided by Aruba 2930F models, thus establishing a scalable, robust and secure wired backbone. There are a mix of Aruba-Instant and controller-based wireless access points depending on cabling access practicalities. Almost 280 have been deployed throughout the sites, including Aruba AP-303 indoor and Aruba AP-365 outdoor models.

"We now have Wi-Fi in parts of the stores that we had never covered previously," Mr. Manaris adds. "And use fewer access points."

FLEXIBLE, SECURE AND READY FOR THE FUTURE

The result is an architecture that is secure, easy to manage and capable of supporting the business into the future. It provides a platform on which to deliver continued service improvements.

"Aruba AirWave means that we can manage both the wired and wireless network from one place. We acquired a tool, through which we can deploy the network configuration to all of our stores at once. It has made a tremendous difference to the way we work, in terms of consistency and efficiency," says Mr. Manaris.

Where it would have taken one person a full day to make adjustments at one store, he explains, today changes can be managed in an hour, for all stores: "This is time our team can now spend on other projects. I effectively have one full headcount freed up for strategic projects. We spent years looking for this tool."

There are plenty of projects to keep the team busy, he adds. Praktiker is currently deploying a new ERP system; the business wants to do more to blend the online and offline shopping experience.

For management, the appeal of the Aruba engagement is a lower total cost of ownership. "We have the flexibility to deploy access points as instant or controller-based, we don't have the worry of the cost of renewing licenses – we own what we've paid for. And we have greater functionality with Aruba," says Mr. Manaris.

Business continuity and quality of service

Whether it be for staff or customers, fast Wi-Fi with the ability to seamlessly roam without loss of connection or diminished performance, is a critical outcome and a valuable offering by the IT team. This is particularly important as mobile POS, scanning and other devices are increasingly rolled out, ensuring reliable operations and consistent experiences.

"Our business continuity plans have so far been focused on the head office," reflects Mr. Manaris. "We are now able to extend this to our stores and ensure that we can minimise the impact of disruptions. This could also include enabling secure remote working and access to for staff who can adopt that model if and when required."

MOBILITY IN THE OFFICE AND ON THE SHOP FLOOR

Staff at the head office now enjoy complete mobility with 1Gb connectivity; guest access is simplified through ClearPass. If the device or user is not recognised, they can be channelled to an isolated VLAN that ensures the same bandwidth but without access to sensitive data.

Instore, customers have free Wi-Fi access. The plan is to enable floor staff with mobile devices, making them capable of taking payments and searching for stock; smart warehousing and logistics are possible with IoT; a pilot of a customer-engaging application is also on the way, with BLE beacons and the Aruba Meridian Mobile App platform.

For Praktiker, the Aruba platform is far more than just a network. It is a source of invaluable data and a way to keep it secure. This data is an enormous asset which Praktiker will be increasingly tapping into in order to enable its marketing, sales, finance and IT departments to draw value from, crafting strategic plans and campaigns to help the business stay ahead of competition, and most importantly, define new experiences and value for their customers.

"The business is hungry for data. Sales and marketing can use this data to shape promotions or instore merchandising. As the market becomes more competitive, data can be our differentiator," concludes Mr. Manaris.