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PCINET

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Which e-commerce software offers the best opportunity for today's web developers?

PCINET crafts custom websites for clients on the Miva e-commerce platform, and president Andreas Toman explains why now is the perfect time for third-party developers to start building with Miva.

PCINET is one of today's leading third-party developers on the Miva platform. Headquartered in Florida, they serve clients across the country and abroad by building made-to-order e-commerce websites that combine the strength of Miva with PCINET's own custom touch. Andreas Toman founded the company in 2002, and today his team consists of hand-picked developers who each bring unique expertise to PCINET's clients.

"Precision German Engineering"

Andreas Toman was born and raised in Germany, and he first started programming computers during college in the 1980s. "I always had side jobs as a programmer," he remembers, "even if I wasn't doing it full time." In 2002, Andreas and his wife moved to the United States, and decided to start a web development company.

"I had a close friend who was very active in the Miva community," Andreas says. "His name is Ivo Truxa, and he told me I had to get started on Miva." Andreas and his wife launched PCINET, and they built their first website for a client within that year. "It was Miva 4 back then," he explains, "but that site is still on Miva today, and he's still one of our clients. So we must have done something right!"

After completing that project and keeping the website stable for a year, Andreas felt comfortable offering PCINET's services to others. "We started advertising our services on our own site," he says, "and after a month we got our first call." From there, he says the growth happened quickly. "It was kind of unbelievable. Our first two clients kept recommending us, and the business started coming exponentially."

Andreas describes an early competitive advantage PCINET enjoyed. "Well, they heard we were from Germany," he says, "so people tended to think, 'Wow, precision German engineering!' They were probably thinking of cars or something more mechanical," he says with a laugh, "but I didn't contradict them!"

PCINET's growth was a testament to Andreas Toman's excellent performance, and as his client roster swelled, Andreas decided to expand his development team. In 2006 he came across Ray Yates, who was an active presence in the Miva online community support forums. "Ray was a great helper in the forums for a lot of people," Andreas says, "and he also had his own Miva webstore at the time."

Ray had experience with scripting on the Miva platform, and when Andreas recruited him he decided to join PCINET. Andreas's wife was no longer involved with the company on a day-to-day basis, so bringing Yates on meant doubling the development capabilities of the firm. "Ray also added skills I didn't have," Andreas says, "so we were then able to offer clients integrated shopping cart design and functionality, as well as custom modules built using Miva Script from Ray."

The ability to do custom work distinguished PCINET from other Miva developers at the time, and over the past eight years Andreas has continued to add members to his team. "We have a total of five developers now," he says. "I'm always interested in adding various skills, so for instance we had an SEO expert join PCINET just last year."

Today PCINET has nearly 300 clients, with 10 to 20 active projects going at any given time. Andreas says his role as the company president has evolved, and he now spends a large amount of his time as a project manager. "I'm much more focused on the client relations side," he says. "I still do development, but I also help facilitate communication among my team members and I keep an eye on deadlines."

An Easy Platform to Recommend

When he looks back at how he ended up developing on Miva, Andreas largely credits his friend's advice. "It really was because Ivo steered me in that direction," he says. "I would almost call Miva my first love, as an e-commerce platform!" While he has looked into other platforms over the years, he says he always comes back to Miva. Andreas and PCINET developer Ray Yates discuss three main reasons why they like the platform.

Structure

"One thing that shows up right away when you're working with Miva," Andreas says, "is the way the data is structured, especially when compared to a platform like Magento." PCINET doesn't build Magento sites, but Andreas explains

that he has seen plenty of them when clients are switching to Miva. "I never really got into Magento," he says, "but since I've done Magento-to-Miva conversions, I've worked with the platform to extract data. Miva's structure is more logical, so from our standpoint, Miva is better."

Security

"Another big thing is security," Andreas says. "I know this is anecdotal, but you never see Miva in the news for being hacked. I've read stories of other platforms being hacked, but never Miva." He says that none of his clients have had the security problems that he's read about happening on other e-commerce sites, and points out that security is one of his customer's biggest priorities when hiring PCINET to build a new site.

Flexibility

Ray Yates, a developer with PCINET since 2006, talks about Miva's flexibility. "With Miva," he says, "you have the ability to make the store do anything. There really are no limits." He's been working with the platform since Miva 4, and so he's seen how the flexibility has increased.

"The new Miva 9 is just so flexible," Ray says. "Usually, the more flexible something gets, the more complicated it gets to use. But over the years Miva keeps getting simpler and easier for programmers and non-programmers alike. So now, you have the best of both worlds, in that a company owner can do things very simply with a limited amount of coding knowledge. But if they need heavy-duty support, there are experts like us who can help with that."

Andreas says these strengths taken together make Miva an easy platform to recommend. "Our clients are always saying the same thing," he explains. "They want a platform that is stable and secure, but that is also customizable and easy for them to use. And they want to know it will last and grow with their business. This is exactly what Miva gives them."

Developing on Miva

It is somewhat counterintuitive, but Andreas Toman is a strong advocate for growing the community of third-party developers who build Miva websites. "Miva is growing, and it will continue to grow," Andreas says. "At PCINET, we think it's important to spread the word. Developers want to make good money, and there is plenty of opportunity for everyone here!"

Ray Yates describes why he prefers developing on Miva. "The platform has a rich, fully-developed API," he says. "It's easy to get the hang of things, and once you get the basic idea of how to write custom pieces, you can write any module without too much fear that you're going to step on someone else's module. With Miva's API, it's pretty much plug-and-play."

Ray compares this to other PHP e-commerce software he has worked on. "With a lot of these other platforms," he says, "you actually have to go in and change the scripts." He says this frequently leads to broken or conflicting modules. "Some of the competitors are powerful, but they are so locked down that there's really no way to write a plug-in that doesn't break something."

Andreas also talks about the support Miva provides for third-party developers. "The support from the Miva side is way better than any other e-commerce platform out there," he says. "I'm always able to reach somebody, and I can quickly get the information I need." He says that dealing with other platforms can be frustrating. "With other companies, you're talking to a faceless mass, and you get different answers from different people. At Miva, you know who you need to talk to, and you get the answer right away."

Ray Yates agrees that Miva's support is better than other platforms, and he mentions the access Miva gave third-party developers in advance of the Miva 9 product launch. "They added the ability for developers to set up a dev store," he says. "The fact that they'll give you a development store for free is great. We're able to have a store that we can use to experiment and

test new functionality, and that's a pretty impressive thing."

After getting a look at Miva 9, Ray is very positive on the future direction of the platform. "I'm just blown away with how well they have thought this out," he says. "It's pretty amazing to see all the features that are coming down the pipe. As a developer, Miva 9 means a ton of new opportunities to help clients build their perfect website."

Growing with the Platform

As he looks back, Andreas Toman describes how PCINET has adapted to Miva's growth. "It has definitely changed since I started building Miva sites," he says. "With each platform upgrade, Miva adds new functionality that used to require custom modules."

He says this can sometimes cause complaints among developers who used to build those modules. "I've heard developers complain that Miva is taking their jobs," he says. "My perspective is a little different. To me, it's great that Miva has been adding things into the core platform because if you're buying a car, you expect the car to have a steering wheel, brakes, and a transmission."

"Even with all the modules now available in Miva, there are still so many special solutions that people will need," Andreas says. "There's still a huge market open to developers, and now the jobs out there for us to do are much better jobs."

He also discusses the growth of Miva's in-house development work. "Miva builds more sites for people than they used to," he says, "but as the number of clients using Miva grows, there's no way they are able to do everything." He says customers choose PCINET for their custom builds over Miva for various reasons, and that a frequently cited reason is timeline. "Sometimes the customer needs their site built sooner

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than Miva can do the work, so they come to us."

Andreas also points out that PCINET will refer clients to Miva's in-house development team if that is the route that provides the best outcome for the client. "It's a symbiotic relationship," he says. "I have their best interest in mind, so I have no problem sending them back to Miva for things that Miva can do best." He gives Facebook integration as an example, and says that in the end, he's not worried about potentially losing the customer. "I know that if they are happy, they will come back to us when the time is right."


PCINET's commitment to their customers includes training them to do as much work on their own site as possible. "We're not the ideal solution for day-to-day maintenance on our clients' sites," Andreas says. He points out that business owners and their employees are the best people to be handling maintenance tasks like uploading new products, updating promotions, or reworking page layouts.

"I've spoken with other developers who ask why we train our customers," Andreas says. "They think we're taking business away from ourselves, but I say this idea of keeping your knowledge to yourself is a fallacy." He points out that as he shares his knowledge of Miva, it generates interest in the platform on the part of the client. "When he knows what is possible, he reaches higher and wants more from his website."

» "In the end," Andreas says, "it has worked out well for us. The client has a better feel for Miva's capabilities, and they come to us when they need help with the heavy lifting." PCINET has many clients like their first, who is still coming back for updates to his site. "We treat them well, so they come back when they want to add functionality or upgrade."

New Opportunities on Miva 9

When talking about the newly released Miva 9, Andreas reiterates his desire to see more third-party developers working with the platform. "Miva 9 just means more and more opportunities for developers," he says. "The product update is excellent, and now is a great time to come learn the platform."

"I'm all for the growth," he says. "There is so much opportunity and plenty of work to do. I want to tell more people to come and develop on Miva." He believes an influx of new developers will only improve the overall Miva ecosystem, and he goes on to describe his view of Miva and associated third-party developers. "Miva is like a castle surrounded by all these thriving villages." He chuckles when hinting at just how well a developer can do. "And everyone in the villages is driving at least an Audi!" 

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