VARNISH PLUS⁺

Case Study

Online Media: Fædrelandsvennen

The Varnish Paywall

VARNISH SOFTWARE

" The Varnish Paywall gives the online edition of Norwegian FVN a **boost**

Fædrelandsvennen (FVN) is a local Norwegian newspaper published in the south of Norway. The news provider had been experiencing an ever increasing slump in their printed edition and the number of online readers over several years before they deployed the Varnish Paywall solution with great results. FVN is owned by the Schibsted Media Group.

The Challenge

The news industry has been facing problems with declining circulation and slumping ad sales for years, even decades. In a difficult economic climate where advertising projections are the opposite of encouraging, online newspapers are realising that ads are no longer a sufficient source of revenue. Consequently, digital media are increasingly considering new options for generating revenue, such as having their readers pay for access. One of the first to introduce such digital subscriptions to readers was the New York Times, which implemented its paywall solution in 2011.

In an effort to have a positive effect on their revenue, FVN presented a new business model to its board of directors in early 2011. The new model included rolling out digital subscriptions to FVN's existing user base. The board immediately approved the idea and during the spring of 2011, FVN online edition's management team developed a subscription model for their content. The goal was to make more quality material available to existing subscribers, primarily readers at and above middle-age, while less content was to be available for non-subscribers.

The Solution

As FVN was already using Varnish Cache to accelerate the delivery of their online news, the paywall solution from Varnish Software was an obvious option for them to consider when it came to finding a solution for pay-for-access content delivery. The Varnish Paywall functionality can be deployed on any kind of content across all platforms. It is most commonly used by online media to check whether a reader has access to the requested page before Varnish delivers it. Once a reader logs in, the publication system in place will inform Varnish to what extent the content should be made available to this particular reader depending on the subscription they have.

A diversity of other paywall control mechanisms can be implemented via Varnish. One of these is Metered, a functionality that allows users to deploy a limited access subscriptions model which, for example, lets subscribers buy access to a fixed number of articles. Another useful function is the ability to detect the location from which traffic to the website originated, allowing, for example, all articles that readers share via social media to be viewable for non-subscription users. An additional compelling quality of the Varnish Paywall is its ability to integrate with all types of publication and payment systems.

How does this work?

But how can Varnish Cache be used for access control?

In a traditional environment, the caching layer only serves up pieces of content without giving any thought to who gets access to it. Since the rules governing access control can be rather complex, these rules have traditionally been implemented in the application server, which can slow down the rendering of the website's content. This can result in companies struggling with website performance after implementing a paywall, as they suddenly have to revert to serving content from their application layer. But with the Varnish Paywall, access-controlled content can be served from the caching edge layer.

To do this, Varnish Cache would need two pieces of information. One would be a header coming from the origin server indicating that a particular piece of information is under access control, maybe X-Access-Control. If the header is present, Varnish would then check whether the user is logged in or not, using a cookie. This cookie would be set by an authentication service and would be secured by signing the cookie cryptographically. The actual authentication can even be implemented in Varnish itself using modules to access data in a database or another data source, although this is not recommended.

The Benefit

FVN chose the Varnish Paywall over other paywall solutions to distinguish subscribers from non-subscribers, a choice that was primarily driven by their own team of web developers and the fact they were already using Varnish for web acceleration. FVN wanted to be a frontrunner in implementing pay-for-access on their online edition and are in fact one of the very first online media in Norway to mplement a paywall solution. The deployment process for the Varnish Paywall took merely four months. Once deployed, the solution met all of FNV's requirements while Varnish Cache still maintained the website's optimal performance and scalability. "Varnish is such a flexible solution that all our paywall-needs could be met within a very reasonable timeframe and with minor adjustments to our publication and payment systems," said Christian Stavik, editor-in-chief of FVN's online edition.

> "The effect of launching the Varnish Paywall has surpassed all our expectations. We are already seeing a great return on investment, as the number of subscribers has grown by 2%, the number of young readers has increased significantly and we are also selling more of the paper edition. Obviously this has a significantly positive effect on our revenue. And we are now able to sell subscriptions 24 hours a day, seven days a week"

FVN deployed their Varnish Paywall solution in May 2012 and two months later the online newspaper was already seeing a very good return on investment. In this short period, the number of subscribers grew significantly, the number of young readers had increased, they were selling more of their paper edition and they were able to sell subscriptions 24 hours a day, seven days a week. "The effect of launching the Varnish Paywall has surpassed all our expectations. We are already seeing a great return on investment, as the number of subscribers has grown by 2% and we are also selling more of our paper edition. Obviously this has a significantly positive effect on our revenue," said Stavik.

The Future

FVN plans to extend its use of the Varnish Paywall and deploy the Metered functionality in the future when they've seen their current subscription model develop.

About Varnish Software

Varnish Software is the provider of the open source web acceleration software, Varnish Cache. Varnish Cache is a reverse HTTP proxy that will speed up a website by storing a copy of the page served by the web server in its cache the first time a user visits that page. The next time the user requests the same page, Varnish will serve the copy instead of requesting the page from the web server. This means that your web server needs to handle less traffic and your website's performance and scalability go through the roof. In fact, Varnish Cache is often the single most critical piece of software in a web based business.

Varnish Software delivers a comprehensive range of Enterprise products and services that will help customers further increase the performance and scalability of their websites. Leading websites all over the world rely on Varnish, including Facebook, Nokia, Limelight Network, The Morningstar, LiveJournal, Qt / Digia, The Globe And Mail, The Hindu and Vimeo.

The Varnish open source project begun in 2005 as an idea within VG Multimedia, Norway's largest online newspaper and Varnish Software was then founded in 2010. The company has offices in Stockholm and Oslo.