

Customer Profile

Information Builders enables agile information solutions with the WebFOCUS business intelligence (BI) platform and integration technologies from iWay Software.

Lawson Products, Inc.

Snapshot

Organization

Lawson Products Inc. is an international leader in selling and distributing systems, services, and products to industrial, commercial, and institutional customers.

The Challenge

Transform a diverse mix of data sources and reporting methods into a cohesive, user-friendly BI environment.

The Strategy

Combine various types of operational data into an efficient data warehouse optimized for reporting; develop BI dashboards, report libraries, and KPIs that make data more accessible.

The Results

Users can easily visualize business trends, manual reporting procedures have been replaced with automated workflow applications, and data analysis and presentation projects that used to take weeks can be completed in a couple of hours.

Information Builders Solution

WebFOCUS, iWay Software, and Information Builders' Consulting (in conjunction with Intersect Solutions, LLC).



Lawson Products Excels in a Volatile Industry

BI Dashboards Help Users, Managers, and Executives

With competition heating up from emerging countries around the globe, U.S.-based firms such as Lawson Products, Inc. stay at the forefront of their markets by being more knowledgeable, efficient, and agile than their competitors. Lawson Products is an international leader in selling and distributing systems, services, and products to industrial, commercial, and institutional customers. The company also manufactures, sells, and distributes production and specialized component parts to original equipment manufacturers in the automotive, appliance, aerospace, construction, and transportation industries.

Each of Lawson's eight strategically located distribution centers provides customers with one-source availability to more than 700,000 products. Additionally, Lawson is continually improving its sales, distribution, and logistics systems as it uses business intelligence (BI) technology from Information Builders to help fulfill its charter: to always deliver the right part to the right place at the right time.

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“Our BI strategy is to offer consistent information across our entire family of businesses,” says Phil Ross, lead BI analyst at Lawson Products, Inc. “Thanks to WebFOCUS, we are always on top of who is buying our products and precisely what we are selling. Our new data warehouse and BI dashboards make it much easier to find and distribute relevant information.”

Previously, Lawson relied on a diverse mix of technologies for enterprise reporting, including PC programs like Microsoft Visual Basic and Microsoft Excel, mainframe reporting utilities, and various middleware software to link it all together. The IT department had to create COBOL programs whenever users required new reports – a slow and clumsy process. The results were not always consistent, since information was drawn from fluctuating sources, often using different parameters. This diverse reporting scenario not only caused confusion internally, but made it difficult to comply with government requirements such as Sarbanes-Oxley.

A Search for Better Tools

With an eye toward creating a more comprehensive and user-friendly reporting environment, Lawson conducted a detailed evaluation of several BI software products. The company spent more than 1,100 staff hours gathering requirements, developing specifications, and evaluating software. “We mainly focused on the vendors identified by Gartner as leaders and visionaries in this market space,” recalls Ross, who spearheaded the project and served as procurement manager. “We also conducted several reference checks and visited other companies to see BI software in action.”

Much of the evaluation period was spent surveying users throughout the organization to learn their requirements for reporting, analysis, and data delivery. Lawson distilled these requirements into an RFP that included hundreds of detailed business and technical specifications. Several vendors responded – some with demos and proofs of concept, others merely with bids. After carefully studying the contenders, the steering committee unanimously selected Information Builders’ WebFOCUS business intelligence environment along with data integration technology from iWay Software, an Information Builders company.

In July 2004, Lawson purchased WebFOCUS along with iWay DataMigrator, an integration product for managing extract, transform, and load (ETL) operations. “Taken together, WebFOCUS and iWay had the highest potential to create value, and Information Builders was very helpful and cooperative throughout the entire process,” recalls Ross. “They provided the information we needed in a timely fashion – unlike some of the other vendors. WebFOCUS was the best business intelligence environment for our needs. The biggest factor was ease of use. Everybody was very pleased with the software.”

Technical Distinctions

Lawson purchased WebFOCUS Managed Reporting, WebFOCUS Developer Studio, WebFOCUS Report Library, WebFOCUS ReportCaster, WebFOCUS Resource Analyzer, WebFOCUS Resource Governor, and the WebFOCUS Financial Reporting option, along with iWay DataMigrator and 10 iWay adapters for handling VSAM, DB2, ODBC, Lotus Notes, and other data types. Summing up its qualifications, Ross says WebFOCUS was the only complete BI environment that could run on Windows, UNIX, and mainframe platforms.

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Six Lawson developers attended technical training classes conducted by Information Builders’ Education department. Within a month of installing the software, they had developed several new reporting applications using WebFOCUS Developer Studio, along with BI dashboards for various parts of the business.

Information Builders’ Consulting assisted with installation, configuration, load balancing, and performance of the BI software, while its partner, Intersect Solutions, LLC, helped Lawson build a data warehouse and associated ETL procedures using iWay DataMigrator. “The services provided by both companies were excellent,” Ross says.

The new data access and reporting architecture runs efficiently on Lawson’s existing mainframe. Each night, iWay pulls data from Lawson’s operational data sources and loads it into a DB2 database structured for end-user reporting. WebFOCUS Report Server and iWay DataMigrator are installed on a mainframe z/OS partition under UNIX System Services. The data warehouse runs in another z/OS partition, while WebFOCUS Developer Studio is installed on a Windows 2003 Server.

“iWay DataMigrator works well for developing the ETL procedures associated with traditional data warehouses,” says Matthew Krudop, managing partner at Intersect Solutions. “It reduces the complexity and minimizes the maintenance effort for departmental solutions of this type.”

Learning the Ropes

As Lawson assembled this modern reporting infrastructure, more than 40 power users and subject matter experts attended training classes in the WebFOCUS Managed Reporting Environment via Information Builders’ Quick Start training program. Many of these business users are now creating their own reports from Lawson’s Sales Data Warehouse. “The whole environment is quite intuitive – you simply run a report and a screen pops up, where a user can specify products, date ranges, item numbers, and so forth,” Ross explains. “Once you press the ‘run’ button, it generates the report for you.”

Krudop believes the BI dashboards are very valuable, since they allow users with very little training to interact with the data and visualize business trends. “Lawson is successfully pulling IT out of the loop and enabling users to handle many of their own reporting needs,” he says. “For example, they can see how certain districts are performing, compare sales from previous years, and perform many other functions. It is a very handy management tool.”

Important reports are turned over to a professional developer who refines them and places them in a report library for other authorized users to access. All production reports are Sarbanes-Oxley certified, which requires an additional level of development, testing, and documentation to ensure all financial data is accurately presented. Since all data arises from the same source, it is easier to ensure accuracy and consistency in the financial results.

“Lawson has done a great job of creating browser-based dashboards to simplify access for business users,” explains Krudop. “WebFOCUS supplies insight that was previously not available. The entire environment is very easy to use, set up, and administer.”

Find Out More

To find out how our solutions can help your company succeed, talk to an Information Builders representative today.

Contact your local Information Builders office, visit us at

informationbuilders.com,

or in the U.S. and Canada,

call **(800) 969-4636**.

Groundswell of Interest

As use of WebFOCUS picks up speed, Lawson has developed its own internal training curriculum to help users make the most of the Sales Data Warehouse and WebFOCUS Managed Reporting environment. More than 40 people know how to write reports, and Lawson trains five to 10 new users every month. "Our main goal is to get more business users on the system," says Ross. "We're giving them tools so they can help themselves to relevant information."

Currently more than 100 people in multiple departments access the BI environment, including accounts receivable, accounts payable, credit, collections, marketing, warehouse logistics, customer service, and IT. They generate profit and loss reports, customer reports, inventory reports, sale reports, year-over-year comparisons, and many other kinds of reports.

Managers are particularly enamored with the WebFOCUS visualization tools, which include 3D bar charts and pie charts, histograms, data constellations, and multiscapes. Users can dynamically change views by selecting, zooming, pivoting, or recoloring charts, making it easier to spot relationships, trends, and correlations in the data. Meanwhile, financial users appreciate the robust Excel functionality built into WebFOCUS software. "The Excel integration is excellent," confirms Ross. "If you do a calculation in a report, it brings the formula back as part of the output."

Many reports are scheduled to run at predetermined intervals with WebFOCUS ReportCaster, then automatically bursted to selected individuals. For example, a regional sales report might be automatically created and distributed to a dozen people every Friday. In other cases, reports are run automatically and stored in a report library – with the pertinent individuals notified by e-mail when new reports are available. "Users simply click on a link in the e-mail message, sign on through LDAP security, and access a version of the report prepared just for them," continues Ross. "In many cases, we're able to replace manual procedures with work-flow applications that are more accurate and efficient."

Sales professionals used to depend on spreadsheet programs to track the status of customer invoices, payments, receivables, and related account information, which often took as long as two hours per week. Now they have a WebFOCUS application that can do the same job in just a few minutes. In another instance, a data analysis and presentation project that used to take weeks can be completed in a couple of hours.

"We're saving time and money on many fronts, partly because our information is better organized, and also because users don't have to go to IT every time they need a report," sums up Ross. "Not only that, but we have better information to run the business. WebFOCUS and iWay give us a data-rich BI environment that is changing the way we work."