

Information Builders enables agile information solutions with business intelligence (BI) and integration technologies. WebFOCUS – the most widely utilized business intelligence platform – connects to any enterprise system or application and enables simple and intuitive interaction with information.

United Stationers

Snapshot

Organization

United Stationers Supply Company, the largest U.S. wholesaler of business products, with revenues of nearly \$4 billion.

The Challenge

Give traveling sales associates access to customer and product sales data on the mainframe while eliminating high printing and distribution costs.

The Strategy

Add a Web-based front-end to the mainframe systems, using WebFOCUS.

The Results

Printing and distribution costs have been eliminated, and sales associates now have immediate access to the most recent data about customers and sales. In addition, customers get improved guidance about sales trends, and distribution centers have adopted the system for many of their reporting needs. The company has achieved a standard reporting interface that delivers consistent results, while offering greater flexibility and reporting depth than ever before.

Information Builders Solution

FOCUS, WebFOCUS.



Don Busch, systems manager for United Stationers.

WebFOCUS Delivers

Timely Information to United Stationers Sales Staff

It's an old problem. The sales associate is in a small town, 300 miles from the distribution center where they can get access to information about the customer they'll meet the next day. Faxing a few dozen pages of data might work, but it'll take the good graces of a desk clerk and a few hours of late night reading to come up with a complete picture of the customer's business.

Using the Internet, this old problem has a new solution: tap into headquarters and retrieve the data. But that's easier said than done when the company's database has millions of rows of data sitting in a database on the mainframe at the company's headquarters in Des Plaines, Illinois.

Well, maybe just a little easier said than done for United Stationers Supply Company. With just five months of planning, programming, and testing, they built a solution with WebFOCUS that delivers critical sales information more easily and consistently to all of their salespeople. They have a better picture of their customers than ever before, faster than ever before, and their customers are benefiting as a result.

“Once WebFOCUS hit the streets and sales reps and zone reps started experiencing it, it certainly surpassed anyone’s expectations.”

From Paper to Screen

Even for an office products company, the amount of paper that United Stationers was going through was significant. Thousands of pages of mainframe reports were printed out of the Customer Analysis Reporting System (CARS) and distributed to field staff – two to three weeks after the end of each month. The recipients of this bounty then tried to extract the data they needed that month, data that would have been far more useful if they had received it two weeks earlier.

The sales team began investigating the feasibility of converting CARS to a Web site that could be populated with the most critical data that the sales teams needed. That request got bumped to Don Busch, systems manager for United Stationers, and Tony Kunzman, senior systems team leader of United Stationers’ End User Computing Group. Accessing 40,000 items from 500 manufacturers, distributed to 20,000 resellers through 40 distribution centers, is no small data-access task.

United Stationers has used the fourth-generation FOCUS language and database to manage its data for more than a decade, which made WebFOCUS the obvious choice. This powerful solution for creating data-driven Web sites not only had all the capabilities that United Stationers was looking for – easy creation of Web interfaces, including drop-down lists, graphical views of data, and drill-down viewing of the underlying data – but plugged almost directly into the data-access programs that United Stationers was already running on its mainframe.

“We had a big advantage in that many of the reports we wanted to deliver already existed,” says Kunzman. “We just marked them up a bit, and adjusted some of the business rules. It was much easier than starting from scratch.”

A Windows 2000 server provides the Web site, but the data remains on the mainframe, eliminating the need to export data or build a special database for the Web server.

New Paths to Customer Profitability

The Web-based version of CARS lets field staff select from six main categories and 26 subcategories of products to see data that is current as of the previous day, giving sales staff a far more dynamic and accurate picture of how their customers are doing.

Zone sales managers can easily roll up data for their region, drill down to individual customers and sales staff, and download data for further analysis in Excel.

Although the system was designed to save paper, postage, and sales staff time for United Stationers, customers are among the biggest beneficiaries of the system, Busch says.

“If a customer calls today and says ‘can you come by tomorrow,’ the salesperson can go to his hotel room and download the data and save it as an Excel spreadsheet. He can take that to his customer and show him what he is buying, what he is not buying, and even what the customer shouldn’t be buying because his product returns are high.”

“We’re more than a little pleased with what we’ve been able to do here.”

The system can also spot general trends that can help customers make good choices. “For example, if the customer wants to expand his office furniture sales, we can show the customer what’s selling in that area,” says Busch. “It’s a great tool for working with the customer and making the customer more profitable.”

Superior Information Delivery

Replacing mainframe reports with Web-based reporting made sense to everyone from the beginning, but “once it hit the streets and sales reps and zone reps started experiencing it, it certainly surpassed anyone’s expectations,” says Busch.

Probably the most important outcome of the project is that WebFOCUS has unlocked data that has always been available.

Having the right presentation has really made a difference in making use of the data, often in ways not initially expected by the team that built the application. For example, sales staff are delighted by drill-down capabilities that give them views that were not available before.

“What was on the hard copy was basically what you got, but this application is significantly more flexible,” Busch says.

The system has about 500 users, some of whom weren’t part of the original plan. For example, staff in distribution centers have access to powerful enterprise inventory and planning tools on the mainframe, but have discovered that many of the reports they need for day-to-day use are much easier to retrieve over the Web. They also like the ability to click on a button and put the data into a spreadsheet for further analysis, something they can’t do nearly as easily on the mainframe.

Better Data, Less Work

Barely a year after the new WebFOCUS system was rolled out, United Stationers decided to turn off the mainframe version of CARS: the Web version is much easier for everyone in the company to use, works with identical data, and delivers better reports.

One of the greatest improvements, says United Stationers Vice President and Field Controller Craig Cizek, is the consistency of the information delivered by the Web-based CARS.

Prior to that people did their own thing. They had to rely on third parties to help them, and who knew what data they were really getting? It seemed like everyone was growing sales because managers got reports that emphasized the most positive data.

Now, Cizek says, “we have an easily accessible application that gives consistent results, but it’s still very flexible.”

According to Cizek the sales staff makes greater use of strategic information than before, because CARS lets them dissect sales in many more ways.

“They can view it by customer segments, by product segments, or by pricing methods, and we couldn’t do that before,” Cizek says. In the future, more complex numbers, such as margins

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for each of these segments, or even individual products, could give sales associates additional strategic information that can help them maximize profitability for both United Stationers and customers.

Because of the way the WebFOCUS system was designed, maintenance is minimal. A small set of tables define the parameters that can be selected, such as warehouses, products, vendors, customers, or zones, but the source data never moves from the mainframe.

"If we add a facility, a zone changes, a product category rolls up differently, or customer groupings are different, all of that appears in a drop-down list the next day," says Kunzman. "It's very dynamic and easy to change."

While the company has not yet calculated precise return on investment, it's already evident, says Busch.

The initial goal was to save paper, postage, and time, and the Web-based reporting has undeniably achieved that. "Before, we had the print room printing it, the mailroom breaking it down and distributing it, the mailroom at the distribution center breaking it down further and distributing it to the sales rep, and if the sales manager wanted a copy, somebody was duplicating it so he had a copy of everything that his sales reps had," Busch says.

The most important benefits are not what the system doesn't do anymore, but what it does: Give field staff and customers up-to-date reports on what products are most popular, provide managers with speedy, drill-down reports, and ensure that everyone in the company is using the same numbers, and getting the right information to the right person at the right time.

"We're more than a little pleased with what we've been able to do here," says Busch.