

CBK

Linking IBM AS/400s and Web Browser Sales Applications, CBK Uses ASNA Technology to Reduce Costs and Increase Revenues



Management at CBK, one of America's largest importers and wholesalers of decorative home accents, prides itself on delivering exceptional customer service through a national direct sales force of 200 representatives.

To stay ahead of its competition, CBK decided in 2003 to provide automated tools to that sales force. One initiative was to provide representatives with Web browser access to the Union City, Tenn., company's highly reliable, stable and secure IBM AS/400 information system via Microsoft's .NET® platform. To do it, CBK turned to technology from ASNA, a developer of innovative software to evolve IBM iSeries® systems.

As a result, CBK can now provide customers with up-to-the-minute pricing and product options and a highly efficient order entry process. Average order size is "way up."

The Challenge

CBK describes its primary customers as independently owned "Mom and Pop" home décor and gift retailers. These customers are served by a CBK sales force made up primarily of former retailers and interior decorators who know first hand what their customers are going through to make their businesses succeed.

Under business-as-usual, a sales rep would visit a customer, lugging two thick catalogues of product images, descriptions, specifications and prices. Because this information changed constantly, CBK had to send out weekly overnight express packages to provide the latest offerings and prices. Each sales rep then had to pull and replace the outdated sheets, a time-consuming and expensive process.

In addition, once customers made their buying decisions, sales reps would write up the selections on an order pad and forward it to CBK's headquarters at the end of the day. Then the order would be entered into the company's IBM AS/400-based information system. This

process resulted in unnecessary delays and inevitable keying mistakes.

CBK management turned to Mark Bondurant, vice president of information technology, for how to automate the sales force.

Whatever the solution, Bondurant knew there would be one given. It had to integrate with CBK's existing AS/400. "We love our AS/400 and saw no reason to replace it," he said. "So our solution had to integrate with that machine, now and in the future."

The Solution

Bondurant and his experienced IT team already knew a lot about CBK's business, "automatically, up-front, without doing any work." But there was a lot they didn't know, too. So IT went into a discovery phase, surveying and interviewing the sales force, riding with sales reps, and monitoring operations. By December 2003, CBK's IT department felt it had a full picture of the sales force's needs.

A first decision would be to provide convertible tablet PCs to the sales reps, with the intent of automating the order process as well as replacing the cumbersome product catalogues. "Our sales reps had no typing skills," Bondurant said, "so I wanted a solution that would run in laptop mode but also tablet mode, allowing for handwritten input. And they also needed a portable printer."

Now came the question of what software could tie it all together with the AS/400s. First, the CBK team looked at purchasing off-the-shelf sales force automation software, but none fully met CBK's needs, especially in the order-entry area. "We had to build," said Bondurant. "And I needed my internal staff to write the bulk of this code, because I needed to leverage their business expertise."

The choice came down to IBM's WebSphere approach written in Java, or Microsoft's .NET platform. Bondurant quickly settled on ASNA's AVR for .NET®, noting warnings he received that

AT A GLANCE

Customer Profile

CBK depends on its highly reliable, stable, and secure AS/400 for back office applications that support the success of one of America's largest importers and wholesalers of decorative home products.

Situation

Customer satisfaction is paramount to the success of CBK and satisfying their customer's needs for fast, local access to quality information is critical to customer satisfaction. Real time information from the AS/400 had to be deployed via the web to CBK sales teams and customers.

Solution

Using AVR .NET, RPG programmers rapidly developed sales automation applications for the web and the iSeries that dramatically improved CBK business.

Benefits

- Cost saving from streamlining existing processes
- Increased order size and reduced errors
- Used existing programming resources

Products

- AVR.NET
- IBM iSeries
- OS/400
- DB2/400
- Visual Studio .NET

retraining his development staff in Java would be too time consuming and too difficult. Alternatively, ASNA's unique product would let CBK's existing RPG programmers quickly become productive in converting AS/400 RPG code for the .NET platform.

"Going down the Java/WebSphere route just wasn't going to happen very fast or very easily," said Bondurant. "I needed my people who knew CBK's business working on this. I needed to retool them and make them productive very, very fast.

"It was a clear choice for me because I could easily convert my existing AS/400 proficient staff over to RPG. AVR for .NET is not the RPG that runs on the AS/400," he said, "but it's not so far away, either."

CBK outsourced development of the client applications to a trusted vendor, Proven Method, who would also use AVR for .NET. "That was a very complicated piece," Bondurant said, "but we had already done our homework and expected it to go smoothly."

Simultaneously, the server application would be written by CBK's internal development team, also using AVR for .NET. "That's the part where we could best leverage the skills of our internal team," he said.

In December 2003, CBK's IT team confidently announced it would have the national sales automation project completed by May 2004, in time for the company's national sales meeting. Noted Bondurant: "This was not one of those cases where we could come back and say, 'Uh-oh, we need more time.' CBK management and the sales force were counting on it."

The Result

CBK launched its applications on schedule and within budget in May 2004, just six months later.

"We had the whole thing ready for beta testing in April 2004 and full-scale launched in May," said Bondurant. "We took possession of the client application, and we haven't had to go back and debug at all."

Since then, CBK has released a new version with 21 enhancements, including additional e-mail applications that promise even a greater return on investment.

Bondurant cites three reasons for his team's success: a good plan, the right technology and the right people involved in development. All three are related, since ASNA's AVR for .NET was at the heart of the plan and let Bondurant use his existing, experienced development team.

From the start, Bondurant built his cost justification for the project using cost savings from streamlining existing processes, and he says CBK is seeing the predicted rapid payback from the efficiencies gained. But the most important measure may be one that was never part of the original business case: average order size has increased dramatically.

"We never built an ROI case around this project to increase sales. We always built it around cost savings," he says. "But the average order size is far larger today, so I know that sales force automation is contributing to the top line through our total order volume."

How much have the orders increased? Bondurant demurs, saying it is significant but that CBK doesn't want to provide the information to its competitors.

"But there is going to be a very quick payback," he said. "In fact, if you look at the increase in sales, the payback is already there. The cost savings will be just icing on the cake."

On top of that, CBK's commissioned sales staff is thrilled with the result.

About CBK

CBK is one of the country's leading wholesalers of quality home décor products and accessories at competitive prices. CBK offers wholesalers and retailers the largest selection of product styles – from the most elegant designs to the latest trends. CBK is made up of the following divisions: Metal Arts, Frame Traditions, Company 2000, Pinnacle Lamps, Seasons Unlimited, Textures, Trendsetter and Wicker Gallery. The CBK brand is sold by more than 25,000 independent retailers throughout the United States. The company's products are sourced primarily from Asia. CBK brand products consistently rank at the top of their competitive categories in point-of-sale surveys conducted by giftware industry publications. The company has 165 employees at its headquarters in Union City, Tenn. and a national sales staff of 185. Additional



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About ASNA

Established in 1982, San Antonio-based ASNA develops and markets unique software products that evolve IBM AS/400 and iSeries/i5 systems. Aligned with Microsoft's .NET initiative, ASNA is the only company to offer a thoroughly conceived, standards-based extension and migration path that solves its customers' business challenges. For more information about ASNA: <http://www.asna.com/>.

Most recently, ASNA joined Microsoft in founding the Midrange Alliance Program, a strategic initiative to help enterprises worldwide reduce the risks and high cost of maintaining, extending and migrating aging IBM midrange systems. The alliance establishes the technical foundation for these enterprises to efficiently move to .NET and includes ASNA products as cornerstone enabling technologies. For more on the Midrange Alliance Program: <http://www.microsoft.com/midrange/>.