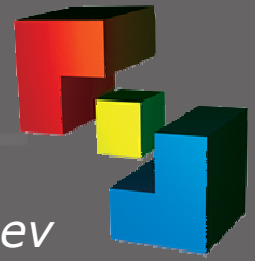


Case Study Lifetime Television



The Lifetime Information Systems Authority (LISA): BizTalk/.NET App Dev

Award-winning Microsoft Gold Certified Partner **The Henson Group, Inc. (THG)** designed and deployed a solution based on Microsoft BizTalk 2004 and including extensive custom .NET application development that integrated a series of mission-critical multi-media processing applications for Lifetime Television Network — a solution that now has relevance for virtually all major television networks.

BUSINESS SITUATION

As a major cable television network, Lifetime needs to provide its programming and production professionals with robust multi-media applications for receiving and processing advertising content and relevant data. To accomplish this, Lifetime relies on a battery of industry-specific applications to receive sophisticated video media elements (Telestream), process in-house produced promotions (ScheduleAll), and manage commercial on-air scheduling (Gabriel).

Like most other television networks, Lifetime's processing challenges lay not in the capabilities of these applications, but in the fact that they were not integrated. This inevitably meant cross-application data entry had to be performed manually, an error-prone process that at times produced significant cost overruns. No longer willing to simply sit back and accept this processing challenge, Sal Amato, Lifetime's Vice President of IT Applications, began orchestrating an internal campaign to rectify the situation. Considering the practicality of what Amato was proposing, the fledgling project quickly gained the support of the business operations faction inside Lifetime — a crucial endorsement that helped gain the approval of the network's senior management.

Following several months of intense research, internal IT auditing, and extensive planning, Amato approached Microsoft, which in turn brought in THG, a specialist in designing and deploying custom Enterprise Application Integration solutions for media industry concerns. From the inner sanctum of Microsoft's product groups in Redmond to Lifetime's bustling Midtown Manhattan offices to THG's Silicon Alley testing facilities, what transpired next was an intense collaborative effort where a dedicated team of developers and IT engineers conceived a ground-breaking new way for television enterprises to seamlessly transact critical data.

SOLUTION

At the outset of the engagement, THG initiated intense exploratory rounds, for even though the consultancy was acquainted with the various processes employed in the industry, it needed to quickly ascertain Lifetime's internal workings. "Our business model is different from that of most networks, as we make changes sometimes right up until the commercials air," Amato explained. "This is why any amount of manual processing jeopardizes the process, because you can potentially run the wrong commercial in the wrong time slot."

It soon became evident to THG that the data and transformation services, and the application integration features, that BizTalk offered would provide Lifetime with the tools it needed to achieve a unified view of its data. As it turned out, it was an opportune time for Lifetime. BizTalk Server 2004 was still in development, with Microsoft preparing to launch the product in the first quarter of 2004. "We knew that if we could get Lifetime an advanced copy of BizTalk 2004, before anyone else in the industry, then the value of the project would jump exponentially," said Greg Henson, THG's President, CEO, and Founder.

The combined Lifetime/THG team soon received much welcomed news. Lifetime had been accepted into Microsoft's BizTalk Server 2004 Jumpstart program. This program provided the team with access to the most recent build of BizTalk, at

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Lifetime
Television for Women

Project Vitals

Industry: Media (Cable Network)

Customer Profile: Lifetime TV is the leader in women's television and one of the top-rated basic cable television networks.

Business Situation: Lifetime needed to integrate a series of industry-specific multi-media applications used by its programming and production pros.

Solution: THG designed and deployed a custom solution using Microsoft BizTalk Server 2004 and including extensive Microsoft .NET application development.

Benefits: Reduced errors and costs associated with on-air scheduling and placement of ads; able to reassign IT resources, producing \$100,000 in immediate savings; achieved higher client satisfaction via more consistency of ad placements

Products Used:
Microsoft BizTalk Server 2004
Microsoft .NET Framework

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Partner

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least a month and a half prior to the general market receiving access. Furthermore, they now had access to an escalation channel for support issues prior to RTM. (After RTM, PSS takes over as part of a customer's existing support contract.)

Following a year of planning, and with the BizTalk 2004 build in hand, discovery was conducted to understand Lifetime's Gabriel, Telestream, and ScheduAll apps and how BizTalk would successfully integrate them. This included defining and communicating the meta-data file types and schema representations, business process rules, and the various Oracle adapters Lifetime could use. Additionally, the business requirements, such as product functionality, load-balancing requirements, usage models, environmental/topology needs, scalability concerns, security, and supportability, were also explored and documented. Based on information gathered during the Discovery phase, THG provided Lifetime with a document that divulged the logical implementation of the custom BizTalk Server 2004 solution. Following the evaluation and approval of the Solution Representation, THG developed and documented the optimum physical architecture based on earlier findings.

With the Solution Architecture agreed on, THG set up and installed the servers. This included properly installing Windows 2003, Microsoft .NET Framework 1.1, Visual Studio .NET, Network Load Balancing, SQL 2000, and BizTalk 2004. Based on the extensive information THG gathered and analyzed during the earlier fact-finding phases, THG's BizTalk specialists assisted Lifetime in configuring BizTalk Server 2004 to accept and transform meta-data files located in a drop folder on the BizTalk Server. This included defining the logic behind the processing of files so that BizTalk could take action based on missing or incomplete data. This process also involved using the BizTalk Schema Editor and the BizTalk Mapper.

Based on Lifetime's description of how BizTalk would receive and transform meta-data, THG developed business rules to apply to each message. THG created custom components on the server using Microsoft Visual Studio .NET and BizTalk's Orchestration interface. Once meta-data messages could be properly routed from Telestream into the Gabriel (a system based on Unix or Oracle), THG customized BizTalk so that changes made to meta-data in Gabriel are reflected in ScheduAll and vice versa, providing true Enterprise Application Integration for Lifetime. And, THG provided a custom built ASP.NET application which allowed domain experts to set mappings of brands to advertisers and associate ISCI codes with products. The custom built .NET application enabled this mapping through the ASP.NET portal.

RESULTS

THG provided Lifetime with a solution that integrated the individual Satellite Fulfillment vendors' information directly into its Commercial Traffic and on-air scheduling systems, all with a single touch. "We needed to know early on if it made sense, and if it did not make sense, to abandon it and look somewhere else," Amato said. "Remember, this is a process that directly affects revenue and translates to hard dollar losses for Lifetime. We knew if we could more efficiently automate data entry and data integration, we would directly impact revenue positively."

By automating what is now the inefficient and error-prone data integration among these applications, Lifetime has gained substantial cost savings and greater customer satisfaction. Meanwhile, the implementation of THG's solution has refined the overall process and increased efficiency significantly through the creation of custom BizTalk adapters that process information.

Lifetime will also realize a significant Return On Investment (ROI) through the benefits of having a dedicated routing and transformation mechanism for data, and the deployment of the Office System for integration with THG's custom .NET application to manage, track, and audit data and information.

Considering the potential processing efficiencies and cost savings the solution offers, many in the industry are sure to take notice. That is because the same processing challenges Lifetime faced are endemic throughout the industry. "I think there are other networks that are only starting to look at it now, and if they are doing it, they are doing it with their legacy code and using ad-hoc technologies," Amato explained. "My understanding, from speaking with broadcast fulfillment vendors, is that Lifetime is clearly a leader in the first one doing it this way."

Moving forward, Lifetime's Amato will now look to apply the lessons learned on this project for custom solutions to improve the network's Program Acquisition, Rights Management, and Digital Asset Management systems.

About The Henson Group



Founded: June, 2000

Headquarters: New York City

Consultants: 37 (including both full-time and part-time professionals)

Partners: MS, HP, IBM, Cisco, Avicode, Dell, EMC, eXc Software, K2.net, Netscaler, Network Engines

Certifications: Microsoft Gold Certified and Cisco Certified

Official Microsoft Competencies:
Advanced Infrastructure Solutions
Information Worker Solutions
Integrated E-Business Solutions
Learning Solutions
Networking Infrastructure Solutions

History: Founded by former Microsoft employees from the development teams in Redmond and Microsoft Consulting Services

Consultants: All MS Certified, most former Microsoft engineers, and each have a minimum of three years of vertical-specific experience

Annual Client-Retention Rate: (2000 through 2004) 98%

Annual Client-base Growth: (2000 through 2004) 50%

Company Description: THG is an award-winning Microsoft Gold Certified Partner specializing in deploying Microsoft technologies for U.S. and international companies across 20 industry categories.

Founded by former Microsoft employees from the development groups in Redmond and Microsoft Consulting Services, THG offers clients direct access to Microsoft's product groups and technical information often not publicly available.

THG's competencies include .NET application development, infrastructure deployments, Line-Of-Business solutions, security, product training, and strategic consulting.

Delivering projects in a fraction of the time it takes competitors, THG's proprietary project management process and attention to detail consistently produces a 98% client-retention rate.

Everywhere clients need THG to be, the consultancy has operations, engineers, and partners located in countries around the world that are committed to the highest level of client satisfaction.

To learn more about THG, please visit www.HensonGroup.com. For more information on how THG can deploy this type of solution in your environment, please call 800.980.1130 or e-mail Info@HensonGroup.com.