Case Study

The Need for Speed

Software tackles diverse, time-sensitive distribution channels

Affy Tapple Inc. has grown from a popular Midwestern caramel apple maker to a leading gourmet brand with multiple distribution channels serving national markets. In addition to caramel apples found in grocery stores under the Affy Tapple brand, the company also markets Mrs. Prindables hand-dipped apples through major retailers including Neiman Marcus and Bloomingdales. Other distribution channels include direct-sale, TV, fundraising events and the company's newly launched direct-to-consumer Web site at www.mrsprindables.com.

With such a diversity of channels, it is no surprise that recent years have been marked by skyrocketing growth. Not only has the company evolved into a major manufacturer, it has also had to keep up with soaring demand and the increasing sophistication and diversity of its customers' distribution requirements, including EDI and other Web-enabled electronic ordering methods. To keep up, the company recently installed a state-of-the-art ERP system, and its IT department has been steadily adding to the company's enterprise software capabilities.

The company's most recent challenge is to keep pace with the higher shipping volume and the broader, increasingly diverse customer base. The company is now shipping as many as 50,000 packages a day to customers ranging in size from individual consumers to multinational corporations. Adding to the urgency of its shipping and tracking requirements is the fact that the company's products are perishable and require closely monitored same-day shipping in specific packaging.

When Your Company's Success Depends on Speed…
The company needed a faster, more responsive shipping system that would work well within its ERP system while integrating a dozen different electronic order channels.

Nick Campbell, Affy Tapple's IT supervisor, notes that the watchwords for the new shipping system were urgency and accuracy. "We believe that data integrity translates into faster fulfillment. In addition to speed and reliability, we wanted greater visibility, flexibility and productivity." Based on these needs, the company decided to go with ProShip multi-carrier parcel and LTL shipping software.

What Took Forty Hours Now Takes Two
ProShip works closely with Affy Tapple's ERP system. It easily pulls information such as addresses, items and quantities, from the ERP system's SQL tables into shipping software to create carrier labels embedded onto a packaging slip. What took 40 man-hours a day now takes only two.

The new system is based on Windows .NET architecture and works closely with the company's recently upgraded order entry system, eliminating errors, speeding processes and providing EDI or e-mail confirmation and detailed tracking information. Affy Tapple further extended the software to automatically retrieve shipping status, carrier tracking, delivery and exception information for every package. This allows pro-active resolution of problems before the package reaches the customer. By keeping shipping status in the same database as order information, Affy Tapple can modify its shipping procedures at peak times to meet customer expectations.

ProShip's client-server architecture allowed Affy Tapple to create a variety of programs to handle specific sipping needs. Creating several small single-purpose applications in addition to the shipping manager application offered greater speed and reliability. Affy Tapple's IT department was also able to create custom solutions quickly and easily.

System Supports Fast-Track Growth
Campbell also notes that the system is open-ended and can easily add new technology enhancements, such as process-level barcoding. Plus, it is scalable and will support the company's fast-track growth and entrance into new market segments.

When ProShip was being built, one of the goals of its design criteria was to permit an open-architecture framework that could easily adapt to what a customer is used to, whether it is a standard graphic user interface application or an embedded system like Affy Tapple uses. Now that all the original design requirements have been met or exceeded, Affy Tapple is working on additional enhancements for its customers, such as extending the real-time tracking information past customer service directly to the customer in real-time.