

COUNTRY's Web-based content hub slashes channel management costs.

Overview

■ Challenge

Reduce content management and application maintenance costs, while improving service to insurance agents

■ Solution

COUNTRY Passport, a single Web-based point of access to content and applications driven by the IBM WebSphere® platform for e-business

■ Why IBM?

Use of IBM S/390® server as core backend platform; extensive successful experience with IBM MQSeries® and IBM WebSphere Application Server; scalability of IBM DB2® database versus Microsoft SQL Server

■ Key Business Benefits

Greater than 25% saving on document printing and distribution costs; elimination of client software maintenance costs

■ Business Partner

Siebel Systems, Inc.



Established in 1925 by members of the Illinois Agricultural Association, COUNTRY Insurance & Financial Services has built its customer base on a foundation of reliability and straightforward communication.

Despite concerns in the insurance industry that e-business might disenfranchise agents and brokers, analysts actually expect these channels to embrace Internet technologies and retain much of their current role in the insurance sales process. That's good news for Bloomington, Illinois-based COUNTRYSM Insurance & Financial Services (COUNTRY), whose entire channel strategy is based on the assumption that e-business is here to stay.

Providing property-casualty and life-health insurance to more than 600,000 households nationwide, COUNTRY has achieved much of its recent growth through alliances.

The company now reaches its customers through 1,500 captive agents, about 2,000 independent and alliance-partner agents and a Web-based direct sales channel.

“We had too much content, too many applications and too diverse a user base for our existing resources to handle.”

—Scott Frazier, IS Manager of Middleware Development, COUNTRY Insurance & Financial Services

e-business—accelerating the pace of business and the pace of change

Key Components

Software

- IBM WebSphere Application Server, Advanced Edition, Version 4.0
- IBM DB2 Universal Database™ for Windows NT® and z/OS™
- IBM MQSeries, Version 5.2
- IBM MQSeries Adapter Offering

Servers

- IBM S/390 Parallel Enterprise Server™
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While COUNTRY views its diverse offerings and multiple touchpoints as a strong competitive advantage, its information and applications weren't always efficiently managed across all channels. Until recently, customer service manuals and numerous forms had to be tailored to each channel—and they were typically printed and distributed by mail. Each agency also maintained its own PC-based (thick) client applications, which accessed multiple distributed customer information databases.

All in all, COUNTRY was managing more than 600 databases and thousands of thick clients, and the company was having a hard time gaining a consolidated view of its business and its customers. "We had too much content, too many applications and too diverse a user base for our existing resources to handle," says Scott Frazier, COUNTRY's IS manager of middleware development.

An early adopter of IBM WebSphere Application Server and IBM MQSeries, COUNTRY had already deployed a variety of Web-based sales, reporting and information tools for its agents, customers and the general public. Now the company wanted to bring these tools—together with the disparate agent systems and content—under a single umbrella.

Capitalizing on the advanced capabilities of WebSphere Application Server, Version 4.0, as well as MQSeries, Version 5.2, and IBM MQSeries Adapter Offering, COUNTRY is creating an e-business platform called COUNTRY Passport. Slated for rollout in the near future, COUNTRY Passport will provide all its agents—as well as 2,000 employees in corporate headquarters—with a single access point for business applications and customized content. Leveraging IBM DB2 Universal Database for z/OS as its central information store, COUNTRY Passport will also serve as a hub for aggregating customer interactions through Siebel Financial Services (previously Siebel Insurance) to help consolidate and manage customer relationships across the enterprise.

“With WebSphere software supporting EJB components and servlets, including JavaServer Pages, this solution has come together very simply and elegantly.”

—Shawn Everly, Senior Application Developer, COUNTRY Insurance & Financial Services

"COUNTRY Passport will save us at least 25 percent in printing and distribution costs and completely eliminate the cost of maintaining client software at the agencies," Frazier says. "Combined with the economies of scale we'll gain by enabling a small group of people to provide content for all our diverse users, the savings are expected to deliver a significant return on our investment."

From content menagerie to well-managed resource

Passport will give agents a highly customizable view of procedural content, such as forms, documents and manuals, as well as training tools, FAQs and sales tips—all accessible through standard Web browsers. For the initial release, COUNTRY is writing its own interface. But in the future, it plans to use IBM WebSphere Personalization to more efficiently deliver the right information to the right agents.

To enable effective enterprisewide content management, COUNTRY is using TeamSite software from Interwoven, an IBM Business Partner. TeamSite uses WebSphere Application Server to drive the business logic that retrieves content from its various sources.

COUNTRY is also incorporating several previously standalone applications into Passport. Illustrations Anywhere is a sales tool that allows agents to model various coverage scenarios and generate life quotes. A COUNTRY-written connector uses Enterprise JavaBeans (EJB) objects to access multiple quoting engines, which reside on the S/390 and the application server.

Independent and Alliance Agent Access (IAAA) is a tool that generates reports from multiple applications on the S/390 servers. Instead of relying on costly terminal-based host access, IAAA now runs in a Web browser, with agent requests handled through JavaBeans that access the mainframe applications through MQSeries.

A powerful trio: Siebel, WebSphere and DB2 software

To obtain a complete view of its customer relationships, COUNTRY decided to funnel all customer-related transactions through Siebel Financial Services applications. When it selected Siebel, COUNTRY insisted that the CRM software support DB2 Universal Database as its underlying data management system. "We don't use Oracle here," Frazier says, "and Microsoft SQL Server would not have given our Siebel applications the same scalability or performance that DB2 offers."

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DB2 Universal Database powers Siebel Financial Services applications used by COUNTRY's call centers, service centers, marketing divisions, claims organization and customer acquisition center.

DB2 is used as a staging database, collecting more than 50 feeds from COUNTRY's S/390 legacy applications—underwriting, policy management, claims and billing—for use by the Siebel Financial Services application. Every night, batch processes route the results of transactions in the legacy mainframe system to MQSeries, which loads them into a central DB2 database on the S/390 server. MQSeries Adapter Offering maps the data formats from the legacy systems into formats that Siebel can use. As Frazier sums up: "Everything that is customer-related goes through Siebel. And everything that is in Siebel goes through DB2."

WebSphere software jumpstarts e-business initiatives

While DB2 resides on the mainframe, the Siebel Financial Services application modules run on a Microsoft® Windows NT® server, along with WebSphere Application Server, which integrates the Passport front end with the Siebel and customer-related legacy applications on the backend.

Running the WebSphere software on Windows NT makes sense for COUNTRY, since it also develops its Java™ technology-based applications on this platform. "With WebSphere software supporting EJB components and servlets, including JavaServer Pages, this solution has come together very simply and elegantly," says Shawn Everly, a senior application developer at COUNTRY. "And since WebSphere Application Server, Version 4.0, is a J2EE [Java™ 2 Platform, Enterprise Edition]-compliant container, the low-level transaction logic we need is built in. This saves our developers time and reduces the opportunities for error. Also, JavaBeans are container managed, so they can also be pooled to allow for multiple concurrent MQSeries connections, thus enabling the platform to scale efficiently as the traffic volume grows."

For Frazier and his team, Passport offers another demonstration of a valuable relationship with IBM. "We got on board early with DB2 and the WebSphere platform for e-business and never looked back," Frazier says. "As the IBM e-business offerings have evolved over the years, they have always been closely aligned with the problems we needed to solve."

For more information

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For more information about COUNTRY Insurance & Financial Services and Siebel Systems, visit:

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