Canada Cartage Improves Customer Service with Microsoft SQL Server 2008

Overview

Country or Region: Canada
Industry: Transportation

Customer Profile

With 3,500 employees, Canada Cartage is a fully-outsourced trucking solutions provider offering dedicated short-haul freight transportation.

Business Situation

The company was witnessing increased market pressure from a host of new competitors. Canada Cartage sought customer-facing and internal efficiencies to differentiate its services.

Solution

The company hired Microsoft® technology partner SHEA Business Solutions and built a new business intelligence/customer-information platform on Microsoft SQL Server™ 2008 database software.

Benefits

- Differentiated service
- Better business insight
- Contained costs
- Platform for Growth

> "SQL Server 2008 has changed the way we manage our business. We're much more in tune with what's going on, and our customers have better visibility into their own operations as well."
>
> Mike Knorr, CIO, Canada Cartage

One of the largest and most experienced trucking solutions providers in the country, Canada Cartage needed to set itself apart from a host of new competitors. The company called in Microsoft® Technology Partner SHEA Business Solutions and implemented Microsoft SQL Server® 2008 database software to serve as the foundation for a new customer service and internal report-generation system. Now customers can get details about their shipments, which enables them to operate more efficiently. And Canada Cartage's managers can access company details faster than ever, facilitating the decision-making process. Employing standard Microsoft technologies, the company saved money and kept service costs in check. The new system also operates as a platform for the business intelligence and customer service enhancements that Canada Cartage has planned for the future.

Microsoft®

Situation

Canada Cartage was established in 1914 and has grown to become one of Canada's largest and most experienced providers of fully outsourced trucking solutions. The company operates a diverse fleet across Canada with all manner of specialized equipment including vans, trailer-mounted forklifts, truck-mounted cranes and sleeper cabs. Fundamental to Canada Cartage's success is integration with customers' supply chains. As a dedicated carrier, Canada Cartage may paint its trucks in customers' colours and logos and trucks are often located at and operated from customer locations. Canada Cartage employs 3,500 and regards itself as a technology leader in the transportation industry.

The company specializes in providing local transportation, carrying goods from clients' distribution centres to retail outlets or to clients' in-town customers. But competition is increasing as long-haul trucking companies consider entering the short-haul market, and smaller providers with one- or two-truck fleets also vie for business.

Canada Cartage needed to further set itself apart from the competition, and managers believed that customer communication was the key.

"Providing our customers with greater visibility into the pick-ups and deliveries happening across the country is a natural extension of Canada Cartage's service model. As we canvassed our customers to determine what features they would like to see as part of our service offering, Estimated Time of Arrival (ETA) and service visibility became a recurring theme," says Jeff Lindsay, chief executive officer, Canada Cartage.

The company needed a way to bring this information to customers in real time and enable faster internal reporting to facilitate decision making. Company managers would get together regularly for "rubber meets the road" meetings, where they would delve into corporate specifics – average delivery times, discrepancies in delivery processes, customer data and other details – looking for potential cost savings and operational efficiencies. The managers would come to the meetings armed with the latest data from the enterprise information system. But when questions arose or more details were needed, the managers would have to ask the IT department to generate custom reports. This delayed decisions, hindered analyses, and ultimately held back the changes that the company wanted to implement.

Canada Cartage needed a solution to help improve business insight and customer service. The solution would have to respect the fact that the company's 15 technology staff members were already well-versed in Microsoft® software, and the firm didn't want to face the time and expense of retraining everyone on an unfamiliar platform.

Expense management would be an important factor in the project. "It's crucial for us to keep cost effectiveness in mind, especially now that we're seeing stronger competition," says Mike Knorr, CIO, Canada Cartage. "We wanted to keep the costs down so our customers would get better service, but not a price hike."

Solution

Canada Cartage's managers quickly realized that the company would have to build the system they envisioned, because there were no off-the-shelf products capable of meeting all of the company's requirements. Having worked with Microsoft technology partner SHEA Business Solutions previously, Knorr suggested that Canada Cartage call in the solution provider once again.

They suggested that Knorr and his team create a report generation and customer information system based on Microsoft programs, and particularly Microsoft SQL Server® 2008 database software. "SHEA Business Solutions has been a long-time proponent of SQL Server, and SQL Server 2008 offers powerful features and performance improvements that help provide tremendous value to companies like Canada Cartage," says Jeffery Hunt, President, SHEA Business Solutions.

SQL Server 2008 delivers a rich set of integrated services that enable companies to do more with their data, such as query, search, synchronize, report and analyze. Providing the highest levels of security, reliability and scalability for business-critical applications, SQL Server 2008 helps businesses create and deploy data-driven solutions quickly, reducing the time and management costs associated with application development.

"Our partners at SHEA Business Solutions helped us understand some of the new features, such as Aggregation Designer to help summarize information, and Dynamic Named Sets for quicker information access. They really helped us build the system into the solution we envisioned," says Matt Waldron, Senior Manager, Solutions Development, Canada Cartage.

The IT team found it simple to program SQL Server 2008 because the new user interface helped streamline the development tasks. The best practices alerts feature, which helps developers build and maintain robust, secure, scalable BI applications, was well received, and team members also approved of the new SQL Server Integration Services, which gathers information from all manner of enterprise data sources and facilitates data warehouse construction.

Combined with a number of Microsoft-base software, SQL Server 2008 also supports Canada Cartage's new OnBoard View system, which lets customers see where their shipments are and when they're likely to arrive. OnBoard View is built on the Microsoft .NET 3.5 Framework, written in C# using the Microsoft Visual Studio® 2008 development system. Canada Cartage made use of LINQ to SQL for Web database development, the Windows Communication Foundation (WCF) programming model for service-oriented applications, and Windows Workflow Foundation (WWF) to build workflow-enabled applications into the solution.

"For our GIS needs and after a lot of research, we went with the Microsoft Virtual Earth™ mapping system. We found that the Web services for forward and reverse geo-coding, digital mapping and route interpolation provided the information our customers were requesting," Waldron says.

Benefits

Canada Cartage's OnBoard View sets the company apart from its competitors, helping the firm address the market pressures it was facing. The company has also improved its business insight through improved reporting capabilities, so it's easier than ever for managers to discover operational efficiencies. Built on standard Microsoft software, the system's costs were contained. Now Canada Cartage has a platform for even more extensive business intelligence and customer service enhancements in the future.

Standout service

OnBoard View helps Canada Cartage's customers run their businesses more efficiently. The system allows clients to request notification by email, text message or voice mail that a truck is arriving.

"One of our customers said, 'What you're giving us is the ability to determine when the freight will arrive, so we can prepare our shippers and receivers,'" Knorr recalls. "That's important, because the shippers and receivers aren't always doing just that one job – they're working elsewhere in the store until the shipment arrives. If they know the shipment is coming, they're better prepared to unload the truck when it comes. That saves them time, and it means they're getting product onto the shelves faster. That's the sort of competitive advantage we like to hear about."

Better business insight

Coupled with Microsoft SharePoint PerformancePoint Services, SQL Server 2008 has become the key tool providing Canada Cartage's operations staff with information about the thousands of pick-ups and deliveries that the company executes daily. Managers can generate reports faster than ever, and it's easier for them to do.

"SQL Server 2008 has changed the way we manage our business," Knorr says. "We're much more in tune with what's going on, and our customers have better visibility into their own operations as well. Internally, the IT staff isn't the bottleneck anymore. If someone wants to generate a report, this new system lets them do it themselves."

Contained costs

Using standard Microsoft-based software, Canada Cartage was able to rely on its existing in-house IT expertise and reduce its development costs, avoiding the expensive training associated with employing a different software provider's applications. And once built, the system spelled a smaller workload for the IT staff members, who now no longer needed to set aside time to develop customized reports born of questions presented during the rubber-meets-the-road meetings.

The low cost impacted customers as well. "System development was relatively inexpensive, so we've been able to offer OnBoard at no extra charge," Knorr says. "It's just one more feature we can offer that sets us apart from competitors."

Platform for growth

Canada Cartage has built an information system that the company can develop further as its needs change. While the first OnBoard version was designed on the ASP.NET Web application framework, the company expects to develop a version on Microsoft Silverlight® in the near future, which will allow the business to take advantage of the new Virtual Earth Silverlight map control feature. What's more, Canada Cartage plans to begin migrating its existing SQL Server 2005 Reporting Services to SQL Server 2008 Reporting Services for simplified information sharing.

"We're really excited about taking advantage of some of the new features like enhanced report authoring," Knorr says. "And with the new Business Intelligence Development Studio report designer in Visual Studio 2008, we're in an excellent position to add more BI functionality in the future."

For More Information

For more information about Microsoft products and services, call the Microsoft Sales Information Center at (800) 426-9400. In Canada, call the Microsoft Canada Information Centre at (877) 568-2495. Customers who are deaf or hard-of-hearing can reach Microsoft text telephone (TTY/TDD) services at (800) 892-5234 in the United States or (905) 568-9641 in Canada. Outside the 50 United States and Canada, please contact your local Microsoft subsidiary. To access information using the World Wide Web, go to: www.microsoft.com

For more information about Canada Cartage products and services, call 905-564-2115 or visit the Web site at: http://www.canadacartage.com/index.html

Partner:
- SHEA Business Solutions

Software & Services:
- Microsoft SQL Server 2008