

The Right Tool for UK Tool brand -- Draper Tools is WebSmart

WebSmart makes easy work of Web-based program development and maintenance throughout program lifecycle.

by Robert Gast

Professional tradesmen and do-it-yourselfers dream of owning large toolboxes filled with tools for all kinds of jobs. For them, a sprawling 400,000 square foot tool warehouse situated 70 miles southwest of London is heaven on earth. This is the home of Draper Tools. It is considered to be the largest cache of such items under one roof in the entire United Kingdom.



Draper Tools UK Headquarters

Draper Tools just completely retooled its B2C Web site to make browsing and ordering effortless for customers and routine site maintenance enjoyable for its technicians. To do this, the company licensed an iSeries Web development tool called WebSmart from Business Computer Design (BCD).

Draper Tools, a top-of-mind brand in the UK, has come a long way from its humble beginnings. In 1919, Bert

Draper, the company's founder, sold government surplus goods and tools out of a wheelbarrow. Now, his grandson John is at the helm, and Draper Tools is the brand of choice for auto mechanics, joiners, electricians, and others. Although the tools are available through dealers throughout the UK, many are sold through its refreshingly straightforward Web site.

Colin Richmond, Draper's Information Technology Manager, was weary of the limitations of Draper's NT-based B2C Web application. The company that wrote the system wasn't in business anymore, slow response times on his NT-based B2C systems forced users to wait unnecessarily, and the three to four clicks it took customers to drill down to find a tool made viewing several different tools a tedious task. Replacing this system with WebSmart applications presented an attractive and cost-effective way for Draper to take maximum advantage of the iSeries, eliminate the NT box, and provide better user experiences for customers and business partners.

Before settling on WebSmart, Richmond looked at several Web application development environments that would produce executables for the company's IBM iSeries Model 820 and found them to be very expensive or too difficult to program in. Through SoftLanding Europe, he licensed

WebSmart in February, and his developers started using it in March. With no formal training, four members of the six-person development team at Draper began developing code with WebSmart by sharing tips with each other. These programmers, all with 10 to 20-plus years of RPG coding and little PC or HTML development to their credit, quickly learned how to use WebSmart's templates and how to customize them with ProGen Macro Language (PML).

Their first objective was to replace Drapers' existing B2C online shopping cart. Having no previous experience with WebSmart or other Web development technologies, they wrote an entire iSeries-based catalog and shopping cart application in just under five months.

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Colin Richmond, Draper Tools

Draper's in-house graphics design team worked on custom buttons and banners that had a look and feel that was consistent with the company's image. Developers then integrated these graphical components into the WebSmart PDWs.

With a full head of steam, developers wrote a customized search feature using WebSmart's unique "root word search" functionality. This let them combine several files for searching purposes without having to build a complex SQL string each time a customer wanted to find an item. This search feature is uniquely intelligent because it uses a table of synonyms against a search term to find an item. For example, if a visitor on the B2C Web site keys in "lamps," the search returns a list of hits containing the terms "torches" and "lights."

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They also moved the existing product catalog containing 15,000 items from the NT machine to the iSeries, and this serves as the basis of the company's hard-copy mail-order print catalog. Since the existing product catalog was already written in HTML and had an extensive collection of images for all products, they simply moved it from the PC to the iSeries by importing the product descriptions directly as HTML into the iSeries database. Now, when the WebSmart program draws a product detail page, it simply pulls the HTML from the product catalog database on the iSeries into the page. Item availability is always represented in real-time because the shopping cart application also ties into the back-end inventory control system.

The payment process is handled through a WebSmart API that connects with a Web Service that clears credit card transactions. Once the order is complete, Draper's shopping cart application sends an HTML-formatted email to the customer to confirm the details. This

is handled by WebSmart's native email functions.

After completing the B2C site, Draper's IT team wrote a simple online ordering system for Export customers. This has replaced a fax ordering system that required each order to be keyed twice--once by the customer and again by the Draper sales team.

Draper also replaced several queries with a simple Web page that lets users select options for extracting information from the database and produce an Excel-compatible spreadsheet in CSV format. "It used to take me half an hour to write one single query request for a user, and I wrote this entire application in half an hour with WebSmart."

Like tradesmen, IT professionals who are responsible for program development have an appreciation for good tools. According to Richmond, "WebSmart has been well received by our developers. I love it. It is very, very quick, and the end results show how successful it is."



Richmond also has an appreciation for the ease with which he and his coding staff can maintain WebSmart-developed programs. "Other development tools allow you to develop applications, but then if you want to make changes later on, it's very difficult. With WebSmart, I have found that you can get right back into the program. I also think it's easier than writing RPG code, and I pride myself on being a good RPG programmer."

Rather than coding in RPG, Richmond now uses WebSmart to do non-Web batch programming because of the

powerful functions built into WebSmart such as scanstr (scan string) and replstr (replace string). "It's faster than coding in RPG and is quite useful," he says.

Aside from customers using the new site to access product information, Draper employees are also using the new B2C site extensively. According to Richmond, "We look up product descriptions, prices, and illustrations of products. It is used all the time because it's very fast."

Richmond's next project is to replace Draper's B2B site with one developed in WebSmart. He knows he and his team have learned a lot from developing the B2C site, and he anticipates rapid development and deployment. He is also considering using BCD's Nexus Portal as a framework for this application to bring a higher level of organization to the B2B site.

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