

Retail Kiosks Served by IBM System i Brighten Sales Picture

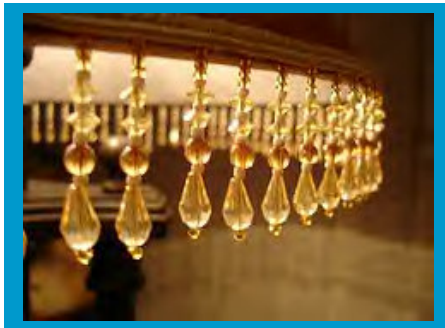
Lamps Plus' POS kiosks use WebSmart-developed applications to spark additional revenue.

What is the shortest distance between 1,000,000 square feet of inventory and a buying customer? Many retailers pursue this question relentlessly and at great expense, implementing systems and procedures that end up on a dark shelf.

Chatsworth California based Lamps Plus, the nations largest specialty lighting retailer may not have found the universal solution, but they have discovered a major building block from Business Computer Design, (www.bcdsoftware.com), and created a system that brightens their sales picture.

"I actually loaded the product, ran through the tutorial and had my availability web page up and running in a single morning. It looked polished right out of the box and was running with a sub-second response time in only a few days."

*Chuck Ackerman
Director of IS
Lamps Plus*



Although light travels in a straight line, lighting doesn't. A new browser based system developed with ProGen WebSmart gives Lamps Plus' salesmen in 41 retail stores throughout the west access to a complete centralized System i-based inventory database. To fill orders, thousands of items are transferred between stores and warehouses daily. When customers see something they like either in the store or on an in-store Kiosk, a salesman can instantly locate the item in any Lamps Plus store or warehouse.

A few months earlier the process wasn't so easy. Chuck Ackerman, Director of Information Services at Lamps Plus was just beginning to install the Kiosks that displayed a vast number of products which these retail locations were simply too small to house. The rollout of 156 Kiosks had to be completed in just 10 weeks.

As the Kiosks came on line, management immediately observed an increase in store sales. Customers commented that they liked them, and naturally whatever they liked the salesmen did too. Then Ackerman began to hear the salesmen clamor: "Why can't we check inventory from the Kiosks!" Since the kiosks were hosted by Microsoft Windows-based servers that had no connection to their production System i which, for 10 years has hosted a legacy inventory application and over 30,000 SKUs, the salesmen still had to use a traditional back office PC running CA/400 to verify product availability and were asking for a way to do it from the Kiosks right on the showroom floor.

Finding the right approach required some thought. Ackerman states, "The salesmen had a valid request but our availability data was on the System i and I didn't want to install Client Access/400 on the Kiosks. CA/400 presents a security risk and it would take away from the browsing experience." His technical staff, still involved in the Kiosk rollout and debugging process already had trouble seeing the light of day with all they had to do. "I wanted something that worked seamlessly with the existing Kiosk website but didn't want to take my html programming staff away from their ecommerce tasks."

Ackerman feverishly searched a solution. "I looked at WebSphere but it's costly and cumbersome to maintain. I also looked at CGIDEV2 and actually created some pages using it but it's very labor intensive from a programmer's standpoint." For 10 years he had been using an RPG application development tool from BCD called ProGen Plus. In fact, at the time, ProGen was being used at Lamps Plus to develop a number of application maintenance and inquiry programs. Ackerman recalled periodic conversations with his sales rep asking that he try a new web-wireless development solution called ProGen WebSmart. "Their product quickly generated web pages that accessed iSeries data with very fast response time," he recalls. "Until now, I really didn't have a need for it."

LAMPS PLUS

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The Speed of Light

In less than a day, after downloading an evaluation copy of WebSmart from BCD’s website (www.bcdsoftware.com), he created a program that extracted inventory data from the System i and presented it on the Kiosk in a familiar browser format. “It was much easier to develop the System i connection with WebSmart.” For Ackerman, it was like flipping on a switch. He lightly jokes that although the inventory application was complete, he had not yet even purchased BCD’s tool. “By the end of the second day I created the Purchase Order for WebSmart.”

WebSmart consists of two components. The Interactive Development Environment (IDE) is PC based and generates ILE/CGI programs. The IDE is used design new web applications or extend existing System i applications. The IDE includes more than 70 templates for building off-the shelf applications with minimal or no coding.

The internal code, ProGen Macro Language (PML), allows developers to extend the logic of programs to customize their applications. PML is easy to use because it includes several programming aids like a window list with all available functions, prompts for values as you type function names, pop-up info boxes with names of valid objects that can be specified for various parameters, online help, a syntax checker, on the fly html editing and more.

The Web Application Server (WAS) is the second integral component in WebSmart’s flexibility. The System i based WAS runs the generated programs. The programs are generated in ILE CGI, and take full advantage of RPG IV features, such as bound modules, service programs and sub procedures. WebSmart also allows developers to deploy applications as Java Servlets using the JSE component.

More Business, Fewer Delays

Has Lamps Plus’ effort been a success? The answer is Yes. Today consumers can walk into any Lamps Plus store, place an order based on thousands of product illustrations and descriptions, and receive their order in days. Ackerman adds, “Very soon after deploying this system we were getting 3,000 hits from salesmen per week.”

Other applications for WebSmart are already in the queue. Ackerman continues, “We’re now working on Product Specification sheets that include photos. The next step will be to create planning department storyboards that commercial customers can use to better plan product purchases.”



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