Avis – sybase

Company: SybaseCustomer: AvisSubmitted by: Portfolio CommunicationsDate: June 2000At Avis Europe the company motto " We try harder" is at the heart of their customer satisfaction philosophy. But the company deals with many different customer groups across 112 countries – understanding which are most profitable and encouraging their loyalty is a sure-fire means to achieve business success. To enable its group marketing team to gain a detailed insight into individual customer buying behaviour, Avis Europe has implemented a groundbreaking Data Warehouse.

Built using Sybase's open database architecture, and with the help of Sybase' Professional Services team, the Data Warehouse allows the creation of highly focused marketing campaigns. When the founders of Avis began renting three vehicles out of an airport location in Detroit, they could hardly have foreseen the scale to which the company would grow. Now the leading car rental provider in Europe, Africa, the Middle East and Asia, Avis Europe serves more than seven million customers a year through a network of over 2, 700 locations in 112 countries. Underpinning this success has been the company's willingness to invest in both people and technology. In particular, the company has focused recently on boosting the quality, speed and reliability of its customer service.

Its latest technology initiative has broken new ground for the vehicle rental industry, involving the deployment of a Data Warehouse to provide customer-centric views of business information that support innovative marketing programmes. The implementation has been made possible by a combination of Avis Europe's own drive, the commitment of partners such as Sybase, and a flexible architecture powered by Sybase database engines.

Winning customer loyalty

Avis Europe has long been a believer in using technology to empower its business vision. Since the late 1970s the company has held details of all European reservations and rentals on anIBMmainframe computer system known as Wizard.

Wizard became recognised as one of the most sophisticated information management applications in the vehicle rental industry, enabling Avis Europe to co-ordinate a fleet of over 200, 000 vehicles and over 7 million customers. Although Wizard has enabled Avis Europe to gain access to general customer and transactional information, the company saw the need to gain a more in-depth view of the buying behaviour of individual customers, in order to create precisely targeted marketing campaigns. Jan Spencer, Director of Systems Development, explained:" We had begun to appreciate the commercial value of retaining our existing customers' loyalty whilst gaining new business – for example through ' walk ups' to our service desks in airport terminals. Our group marketing team wanted to be able to examine our customers' buying patterns in detail. In particular, they wanted to identify customers who regularly and frequently rented a car from Avis Europe. Although the information was within our transaction systems, it needed to be reorganised and made more accessible so that marketing personnel could cross-reference records and view a single customer's entire purchasing history with Avis Europe.

" She added: " Enabling users to navigate quickly through the large volumes of customer data held and perform ad-hoc queries was also going to be essential. The marketing team was eager to dissect and interrogate

customer information on the fly to gain meaningful and up-to-date business insights.”

A Collaborative Build

Avis Europe recognised that it needed to re-engineer, cleanse and re-organise its transaction data into a central data repository that marketing personnel could use. That meant adding a powerful relational database and decision support capabilities to provide the requisite querying performance and agility. Spencer said, “ We needed to source a group of suppliers that could combine their individual expertise and product excellence and provide collaborative support to help us build a Data Warehouse. Each supplier needed to be able to demonstrate a willingness to work in partnership and give the same 110% commitment that we expected from our own internal team.

They also had to substantiate that they understood the importance of this project to Avis Europe, and the enormity of what we were aiming to achieve.” She continued, “ Of all the suppliers we evaluated Sybase had that winning combination of product excellence, a solid reputation and a willingness to provide quite exhaustive support. From our initial discussions the Sybase Professional Services team took time to examine in depth not only our technical requirements, but also what we were aiming to achieve in business terms. Many suppliers might say they could do that. The difference with Sybase was that they could demonstrate a proven track record in achieving that for their customers time and time again.

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Accessing millions of records in minutes

The jewels of customer information that the Avis Europe Data Warehouse holds have been extracted from the company's legacy IBM mainframe system by ETI Extract and migrated to the Sybase Open Systems platform. Sybase Adaptive Server Enterprise 11. 5 and Sybase IQ 11. 5 servers running on Sun Solaris are accessed using Brio's OLAP desktop querying tool over a TCP/IP network by marketing users within Avis Europe's main headquarters in Bracknell, UK. Although only the group marketing team directly accesses the system, this division supports all of the company's European offices with local marketing initiatives as well as group-wide programmes.

The data within the Data Warehouse relates to 28 million reservations and 25 million rental transactions across Avis Europe's entire European operations. This amounts to a massive 110 Gigabytes of data within Sybase Adaptive Server Enterprise and 60 Gigabytes of compressed data within Sybase IQ. Spencer said, " Without Sybase IQ, gaining rapid querying speed and ad hoc navigability with such huge volumes of data would be nigh impossible – but the capability of Sybase IQ is truly outstanding. To run the type of ad-hoc query that our users delight in on even the most powerful database engine at these levels could take up to 18 hours. On Sybase IQ the same query takes under a minute.

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Creative marketing

With the Data Warehouse project successfully live, the marketing team at Avis Europe has been quick to use the new customer-centric view of

information in innovative and creative ways. Spencer said, " The Data Warehouse solution has enabled us to gain fresh insights into each individual customer's buying patterns. This lets our marketing team create campaigns that are targeted towards specific customer segments, and develop services that meet their specific needs." One of the most important of these new initiatives is a pan-European strategy to enhance customer loyalty and encourage customers to rent through Avis Europe more frequently. Possibly this may include the offer of a premium level of service to regular users.

Spencer said, " Because our data now places the customer at the centre, our marketing team can identify how often an individual has rented a car from us. Initially they will be using that information to target specific marketing campaigns and loyalty programmes to those customers. Ultimately, however, we will be able to profile these profitable customers and generate campaigns to win more of them." She continued, " When you appreciate that it costs more to attract one new customer than to keep an existing one, then you begin to realise the impact this will have on Avis Europe's revenues and overall profitability." The creation of the Data Warehouse at Avis Europe has again highlighted the company as a pioneer in both technological development and within the vehicle rental industry.

Spencer said, " When we first looked at building a Data Warehouse we knew it was an ambitious undertaking. Avis Europe, however, has not built its reputation on being faint-hearted, and we were confident that with the right team supporting us we would deliver a solution that would bring us tangible commercial business benefits both in the short term and for the future." She concluded, " Thanks to the hard work, technical expertise and collaboration

of Sybase and the Professional Services division, all the suppliers on this project and our own internal team, we have achieved a trail-blazing implementation. We know that others in the industry are now looking to replicate what we have done – but as ever it is Avis Europe that is leading the way!"