



Solution Overview

INDUSTRY

Distribution
Internetworking Products

SCENARIO

ICS looked to e-commerce to expand their business opportunity and serve their customers better.

COMPANY PROFILE

ICS is a worldwide distributor of internetworking products, selling its products and services to resellers and systems integrators, government agencies and to the retail market.

SOLUTION

Microsoft Great Plains provided the platform and e-commerce solution for implementing ICS' plans. ICS deployed Microsoft Great Plains eCommerce, built on the Microsoft .NET platform. eCommerce seamlessly integrates ICS' four online storefronts with their business processing and internal systems, running on Microsoft Great Plains eEnterprise.

SOFTWARE USED

Microsoft Great Plains eEnterprise
eCommerce

Financial Series

Distribution Series

Microsoft SQL Server 2000

Microsoft Site Server Commerce Edition



ICS Consolidated

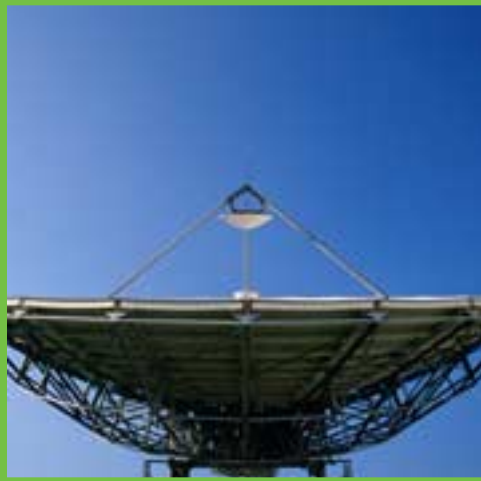
ICS drove nearly \$1 million in their first month of business-to-business e-commerce sales. Built on the Microsoft .NET platform, Microsoft Great Plains eCommerce seamlessly integrates ICS' online commerce sites with their business management system, Microsoft Great Plains eEnterprise. Both applications use the same data from Microsoft SQL Server 2000—boosting internal efficiencies and real-time customer service.

ICS Consolidated owns and operates four technology companies: Interlink Communication Systems, a worldwide distributor of internetworking products; GovStreetUSA, a government focused IT integrator; NetLink Technologies, a commercial reseller; and CableStoreUSA, an IT cable supplier.

In 1998, ICS looked to e-commerce to expand their business opportunity and serve their customers better. By adding business-to-business (B2B) e-commerce to their existing product catalog Web site, ICS could deliver product ordering capabilities, customer-specific pricing, access to accounts receivable status, real-time inventory, recommendations for complementary and substitute products, multiple buyer support and online quotes to their resellers. In addition to lowering internal costs, a well-designed e-commerce site would help ICS' resellers improve their own business models, resulting in benefits for the entire organization.

In addition to the improvements to existing sales channels, ICS saw e-commerce as a way to reach new customers, and made plans to launch new business-to-consumer (B2C) and business-to-government (B2G) sites.





“We’re zealots when it comes to the Internet. We are a worldwide distribution company, and believe that our Microsoft Great Plains e-commerce systems position us to lower costs, offer better service to our customers and therefore win in the markets that we serve.”

*Thomas Straub
President*

However, in order to succeed with their e-commerce plans, ICS needed to find a solution that would allow them to use a single architecture for all Web stores, and that solution must also provide integration with ICS’ order processing and business management systems.

Business solution

Microsoft Great Plains provided the platform and e-commerce solution for implementing ICS’ plans. ICS deployed Microsoft Great Plains eCommerce, built on the Microsoft .NET platform. eCommerce seamlessly integrates ICS’ four online storefronts with their business processing and internal systems, running on Microsoft Great Plains eEnterprise. Site visitors can quickly drill down on product and marketing details, display ICS and partner product availability and negotiated prices, and purchase products and services.

Based on the Microsoft .NET family of products, with SQL Server 2000 forming the single source of data for all applications, ICS’ solution is a “perfect example of an integrated supply chain business with the Microsoft systems providing the backbone,” says ICS President Thomas Straub. “The capabilities of the integrated eEnterprise and eCommerce solutions have really helped us to run multiple companies. With one architecture we’ve been able to roll our business out to three different customer segments: business, government and consumers (B2C).”

Benefits

Following its remarkable debut of nearly \$1 million in sales for the first month, ICS’ B2B e-commerce solution, InterlinkWeb.com, continues to deliver on long-term benefits. Superlative self service boosts customer loyalty now that resellers can track their own orders, manage buyer and sub-buyer accounts, and access invoice and shipment details electronically. And seamless integration between ICS’ storefronts and back office systems create dramatic savings in reduced overhead.

It’s no wonder that Straub describes his company’s new electronic storefronts as “a rocket ship headed straight up.” InterlinkWeb alone proves that a phone-based, paper-driven company can make the leap to e-commerce and harness a vibrant B2B market

with the right electronic commerce solution running on the best platform. ICS got the combination right when they chose eEnterprise as the backbone of their business management system and eCommerce as the Web-based order processing system that integrates storefronts built on the .NET platform to eEnterprise.

Delivering a distributed computing environment through Microsoft .NET

But what makes this elegant solution stand out is the way eCommerce streamlines Web-based sales order processing by providing seamless integration of orders from the storefront to eEnterprise via the Business Processing Pipeline component of Microsoft Site Server Commerce Edition. With this method in place, the storefront utilizes the same Microsoft SQL Server 2000 database that serves ICS' business management applications.

This single database structure provides ICS with an incredibly efficient solution that decreases inventory maintenance costs and increases ROI. According to ICS Vice President and Chief Technology Officer Paul Dietrich, "Our online success would have been impossible without eCommerce and the Microsoft .NET platform. With a single architecture we are able to integrate disparate inventory systems, create inter- and intra-enterprise transactions and power four Web-based stores. Being able to create a multi-faced commerce system using a single platform drastically decreases the cost of deployment which in turn has a dramatic impact on our profitability."

Believing in B2B and B2G

"ICS' e-commerce solution is an example of a distributed 'n-tier' computing environment," says CEO Straub. "It's a seamlessly integrated infrastructure that collects, manages, organizes and disseminates information throughout our enterprise."

"We're zealots when it comes to the Internet," confesses Straub. "We are a worldwide distribution company, and believe that our Microsoft e-commerce systems position us to lower costs, offer better service to our customers and therefore win in the markets that we serve."

ICS' four Web sites deliver a virtual catalog of product

information that total more than 100,000 products, and have been well used by their global network of commercial, retail and government customers. The number of transactions on the ICS Web sites has quadrupled over the past year, and ICS' Microsoft .NET architecture has allowed them to easily scale to meet demand, with ample room for additional growth.

In addition, the company added clustering functionality for SQL Server 2000 thereby dramatically increasing the stability and availability of their sites. Dietrich is very pleased about ICS' stability built on Microsoft SQL Server 2000. "By using Microsoft clustering technologies we are able to create an environment in which the downtime is determined by ICS, not the system. By employing this clustering technology, we have increased our overall availability to 99.992%. This is a substantial increase over our prior non-clustered architecture."

A new level of customer service

Management envisioned a new system that would automate their order processing and provide a new level of customer service by enabling access to information in real time through the ICS Web sites. This meant taking their already vast Web site and integrating a large number of functions such as pricing, inventory, shipping status, accounts receivable and product information into a single business solution. In order to streamline operations and reduce overhead, the new solution had to run from one platform, based on a single database. New data only needed to be entered once, automatically updating the entire system. "We knew that developing an easy-to-use site would be a challenge," Straub says. "In a way, though, that's good because most of our competition won't follow the path to this level."

To accomplish these goals, the ICS executive team conducted a well-planned charge into the e-commerce world. They targeted specific constituent groups with specific sites, rolling them out one at a time and leveraging the investment, resources and learning they gained each time.

Since 1999, ICS has opened three online sites, with one additional site on the drawing board. ICS' original site, InterlinkWeb.com, handles mostly repeat business with their resellers. Instead of focusing on the needs of a retail clientele, InterlinkWeb concentrates on

reporting, allowing their resellers to see their current account status, order status, credit line and stock status. This information helps their resellers manage purchases with ICS better, giving the resellers one more reason to work with ICS instead of a competitor who can't provide this level of information.

The second site, CableStoreUSA.com, sells computer and communications cables in a B2C environment. Most transactions are credit card based, however, returning customers may be approved for on-account purchasing and customer specific pricing. Dietrich says, "From a back-end perspective, CableStoreUSA uses the exact same functionality as our InterlinkWeb B2B site—we just package it differently so it has value to the retail customer. The Microsoft Great Plains business solutions have allowed us to move forward faster."

ICS' third site and major focus today is GovStreetUSA.com, a B2G site focused specifically on state and local government organizations. "We do very well in all of these local governments, but particularly well with the smaller jurisdictions, which are perhaps too small for major vendors to serve directly." According to Dietrich, "What we've been able to do is to take the functionality we created for InterlinkWeb and CableStoreUSA, and add the ability to establish contract pricing for our government customers. So, for example, when the city of Sarasota, Florida, comes to us to buy an IBM notebook computer, the price they see is the Florida state contract price."

Back office integration

Microsoft Great Plains' seamlessly integrated solution met all of ICS' B2B feature needs and connects their Web sites to their business management system to achieve the kind of internal efficiencies they were looking for. "eCommerce is a tool set built on Microsoft technologies, and that was important to us," says Dietrich. And the fact that the e-commerce architecture is based on Microsoft .NET platform, with SQL 2000 as the single database for the entire solution enabled ICS to achieve its goal of coupling the storefront with the backend.

Systemwide benefits

From the time of its January 1999 debut, the ICS electronic storefront was an immediate hit with its

customers. “Our customers were flabbergasted at the quality of the site,” says Straub. “During that first month alone, we processed 30 percent of our transactions via the Internet.” After three years and opening new markets, ICS executives are thrilled with the site’s results—and optimistic about the future. “With eCommerce, I can see our salespeople being four to five times more productive than they were without it.”

“The eEnterprise Release 6 upgrade provided us with additional benefits and time-saving features,” said Dietrich. “The automated integration between the Sales Order and Purchase Order modules has decreased our order handling time by more than 50%.” Additional cost reduction benefits are inherent throughout the system. For example, at GovStreetUSA.com, over 70% of sales are unassisted and all of our purchasing is automated; in other words, no sales or purchasing agents touch the orders at all, from the time of order entry over the Web by the customer, to the point of shipment by us or our suppliers.

Overall, ICS is extremely pleased with the eCommerce solution they’ve deployed. According to Straub, “Building our entire system and supporting our subsidiary companies on the Microsoft .NET platform and integrating them with eCommerce and eEnterprise has helped increase our customer satisfaction levels, decrease our costs and most importantly, positively affect our bottom line.”

**For every business
problem there is a
Microsoft Great Plains
Business Solution.**