

The Flower Fields Alliance

Floriculture Consortium Combines, Streamlines Real-Time Ordering with the .NET Framework

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*When the Flower Fields Alliance and Syngenta/S&G Flowers wanted to streamline the way growers order flower seeds and rootstock, they contracted with partner **Advantage Factory** to build a Web portal. Advantage Factory built the portal around ASP.NET, Commerce Server 2002 and SQL Server 2000, and tied it to the various members' back-end ERP systems using BizTalk 2002 and Microsoft message queues. Time to market was very quick. A complicated manual process was streamlined into a single Web order.*

Floriculture is a mature industry that lags many others in its use of computer technology. A mobile salesman, until recently, would take hand written orders from growers for plant materials which would be keyed into the broker's system and later re-keyed into the supplier's system.

Syngenta/S&G Flowers, a major broker and supplier, teamed up with the Flower Fields Alliance (FFA): Paul Ecke Ranch, Goldsmith Seeds, Fischer USA and Yoder Brothers, all major suppliers of plant material. Together, the members of FFA represent about 40% of the 'color' sold in the United States. With diverse ERP systems of their own such as SAP and Great Plains, they decided to build a portal that would make it easier for growers to do business with them.

The Flower Fields Portal project began in 2002. "The initial concept was started by Syngenta's request for

The Flower Fields to become a part of its GreenDemon.net Portal," says Gary Falkenstein, Director of The Flower Fields Alliance. "We, however, wanted to do our own thing." GreenDemon is Syngenta's own B2B portal site. Each of the FFA members had its own ERP, ordering and inventory systems, with no two systems alike.

Syngenta and the FFA contracted with **Advantage Factory**, a Microsoft Certified Partner, to build a portal Web site and 'eHub.' The portal site would provide real-time inventory information and accept orders, talking in turn to the partners' systems and to their broker, Syngenta/S&G. Each partner system would have its own XML adapter.

Advantage Factory chose Microsoft® ASP.NET, Commerce Server 2002 and the Microsoft .NET Framework to implement the portal site, along with Microsoft SQL Server™ 2000. They used ASP.NET-based Web services, Microsoft BizTalk® Server 2002, and Microsoft message queues to implement the adapters. They wrote their code 70% in Microsoft Visual C#® and 30% in Microsoft Visual Basic® .NET.

Dramatic Reduction in Code

The choice of the .NET Framework accelerated development by reducing the amount of code to write

Solution Overview

Customer Profile

The Flower Fields Alliance – Paul Ecke Ranch, Goldsmith Seeds, Fischer USA and Yoder Brothers – represents about 40% of the 'color' sold in the United States. Syngenta/S&G Flowers is their broker.

Business Situation

The members of FFA have diverse ERP systems; they wanted to create an industry-wide Web Portal to link growers with plant material suppliers and to automate inventory queries and ordering.

Solution

FFA and Syngenta contracted with partner Advantage Factory to build a Web portal using the Microsoft® .NET Framework, ASP.NET, the Windows Server System™ and XML Web services.

Benefits

- Dramatically reduced time to market
- Able to easily connect with legacy systems
- Made ordering process much more efficient

Software and Services

Microsoft Windows® 2000 Advanced Server
Microsoft SQL Server™ 2000
Microsoft Visual Studio® .NET 2003

- Visual Basic® .NET
- Visual C#® .NET

Microsoft Commerce Server 2002
Microsoft BizTalk® Server 2002

Partners

Advantage Factory

Fast Facts	
Number of developers to build application	6
Number of months to build application	6
Number of total users	10,000
Availability (uptime), 1 st 8 months	99.995%
Amount of money saved annually per partner	\$2.5M

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For more information about The Flower Fields' products and services, visit the Web site at <http://www.theflowerfields.com/>.

For more information about Advantage Factory's products and services, call 360-707-5750 or visit the Web site at <http://www.advantagefactory.com/>.

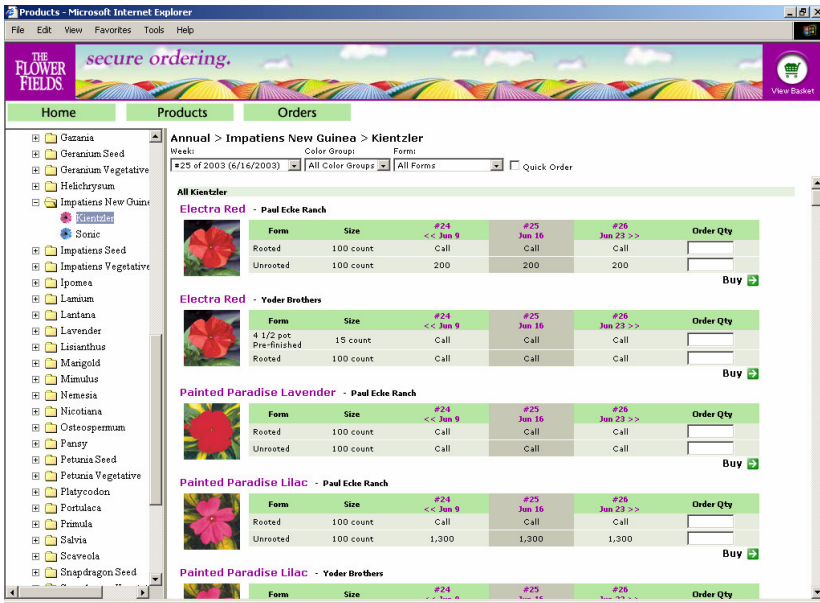
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and debug. Dan Downing, VP/CTO: "The dramatic reduction in code also yielded a bonus benefit in

Integration Manager at Syngenta/S&G Flowers. "The portal simplifies the ordering process for our



customers during peak season, and furnishes a common platform enabling the supply pipeline to be 100% integrated in real time across our product suppliers. For example, when a grower needs to fill bench space, that grower will be able to make decisions immediately without having to wait for follow up phone calls from a broker salesman or supplier. Secondly, a customer can search for product items across multiple suppliers for multiple ship weeks at one time. As a result, finding that 'red geranium' cutting is

dramatically reducing QA testing cycles. The previous 'Classic' N-tier deploys were invariably slow, painful and prone to the typical enterprise scale deployment errors such as "DLL Hell". With ASP.NET they are essentially an XCopy now, with faster deployment and less code.

much more efficient, since the grower can search across more than one vendor, and more than one week at a time.

"We have been better able to concentrate on really 'nailing' the business requirements and functionality of a system, realizing that we can 'resist the urge to get coding' since the .NET Framework has so much built-in capability. In a similar fashion, we have found Microsoft Visual Studio® .NET to be invaluable as a rapid prototyping tool."

"Probably the most important business advantage is that the customer and channel partner relationship is strengthened. That is because the broker representative is now able to focus on the grower's true business needs and is less concerned with the rote tasks associated with the ordering process.

"The .NET Framework and Visual Studio .NET allowed us to take our prototypes and convert them from static HTML to dynamic ASP.NET much faster than previously possible," adds Matt Bezanson, Senior Software Engineer. "The speed increase is due to both the ASP.NET code-behind technology, and the ability to work on middle and data tier components in the same IDE as the presentation tier components."

"This allows a better partnering relationship to occur, as well as greater operational efficiency for us and our partners. We now have more time to focus on our customer's needs and how they like to do business.

"Exactly What We Needed"

The technology worked from a business viewpoint as well. "Microsoft's .NET Framework, servers and technologies for The Flower Fields were exactly what we needed," says Gary Falkenstein, CEO of Fischer USA. "What we had previously were complicated programs that were difficult for our customers to understand and deal with, and virtually no timely flow of critical information to them - such as product inventory and availabilities.

Simplified Ordering Process

There are palpable business benefits to the joint portal, according to Monty C. McCoy, Technology





"What was much worse was that the ordering process had multiple touch points, was unreliable, and had 4 separate ways to handle an order - one for each company. Now our customers have on-line, real time availabilities, immediate confirmation and a single touch point for ordering multiple products across all four of our companies, making it easier to do business with the Flower Fields Alliance. The Microsoft .NET Framework, platforms, technologies, and solutions have put The Flower Fields and Syngenta in front of our customers 24/7."

24/7 is no exaggeration. In its first 8 months, the Flower Fields site has logged an impressive 99.995% availability based on its Microsoft Operations Manager logs, thanks both to the stability of the software and clustered hardware. The one 12-hour period of downtime was traced to a load-balancing bug, which has since been patched.

In addition, operational savings from the site have been significant. "Right now, each company in this portal expects to save \$2.5--\$3 million in operating costs over the first 12-18 months of portal operation," says Ken Schneider, President of **Advantage Factory**. "This operational savings is the direct result of removing 12 human, manual touch points for business transactions between each partner, such as ordering, inventory availability, pricing, lost/duplicated or inaccurate orders from fax/phone/email, and the redeployment of personnel from an order taker role to focus more on a sales and marketing role. The portal basically automates a series of business processes

that have been traditionally manual in this industry for years.

"In addition, the floriculture industry produces and sells genetics that are perishable goods. Now that the Portal is operational, every participating company's risk of perishable inventory is greatly reduced because real time inventory, availability and order status is available to customers from their respective ERP systems. This is a milestone never before achieved in this industry. The result is that perishable inventory is expected to be reduced by as much as 80%, and this will drive an expected 20-30% incremental revenue and profit/gross margin for each company in the first 12-18 months.

"We expect even more impact for new genetics in coming years. A key metric is that for every genetic dumped for perishability reasons; each company must sell 5 more units to achieve enough margin to break-even on that one perishable unit. The Portal, built on the .NET framework, features such things as simultaneous inventory availability from multiple company ERP systems around the country. This feature alone will alleviate the perishability issue and drive increased revenue and margins.

"We are now preparing to move this portal to the next generation of the .NET framework, and take advantage of new features in upcoming products like BizTalk 2004."