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Dynamic Content Software Strategies Consulting Service

September 3, 2004

PaperThin Won't Jam Your IT Machine

Introduction

Non-profit organizations, associations, and educational institutions represent an interesting aspect in the potential market for technology. Generally, these organizations have less discretionary income to spend on technology purchases, and in many cases may be less focused on how technology can improve their bottom line. Their focus is on the communication goal – whether it is a university educating students or a non-profit preserving nature – and peripheral issues can often be ignored or dealt with in an ad-hoc manner.

Truth be told, most mid-market companies, and workgroups or departments in larger ones, face similar issues. This can lead to some common problems that many in these verticals face related to IT resources. One of the most prevalent is that of having only a few overworked IT professionals on staff.

This bind is directly related to the opportunity for Web Content Management (WCM) solutions. As often as not, these types of organizations have developed home-grown solutions as a way to manage their Web content. Of course, it is natural that a solution designed to process a few Web pages or static content is continuously added on to as a way of handling increasing traffic or managing more dynamic content. The results tend to be a monstrous solution that no single person knows how to manage, let alone fine-tune for improved performance.

Over time, an organization can end up with an unmanageable “solution” that takes many employees many hours to maintain and update. This is precisely why an organization might have decided against purchasing software in the first place. Non-profit organizations and others with personnel and money restrictions need solutions that have features and price points that will enable them to break the cycle of inadequate tools.

First off, there is the cost factor. This can be broken down into a couple of subcategories. The most obvious cost is the software. This is also the one that these organizations may examine first. That is not to say that software is the end-all consideration, or even the most important cost. Depending on the implementation, professional services can also add substantially to a project's bottom line.

Time to implement is another important area of consideration. The shorter the time to implement, the better for these organizations with tight IT

resources. Likewise, a complete system that requires too many resources to operate may not fit the model of a non-profit or association. At the same time, this does not mean that these organizations can sacrifice features. For example, many educational institutions need Web sites that can be nearly as complex as those of the largest companies, as they get many thousands of hits per day. The same can be said of a large amount of non-profit organizations and associations.

What it boils down to is that organizations in these industries – non-profit, education, and associations – need relatively inexpensive, quick-to-implement, easy-to-maintain, and scalable solutions that can handle heavy loads without sputtering. As mentioned earlier, the same can be said of almost any mid-sized company, or even workgroups or departments within large organizations. As a result, the pain points, and potential market for solutions, actually reach a very broad set of organizations. While finding a solution that can handle all of these issues may seem like a tall task, there are options out there that fit most of these requirements.

PaperThin

One of the more interesting solutions is CommonSpot from PaperThin. PaperThin has headquarters in Quincy, Massachusetts and was founded in 1993. The company is privately-held and has approximately 25 employees. Founder J. Todd Peters is still with the company and currently serves as President. PaperThin was recently named as one of the 50 fastest growing technology companies in New England in an annual award offered by Deloitte.

Version 1.0 of CommonSpot debuted in 1998, and the company has since been working to perfect the application through numerous development cycles. It is built on the ColdFusion application server, allowing CommonSpot to be deployed on Windows, Linux, or Solaris platforms and under any J2EE server including BEA, WebSphere, or SunOne. CommonSpot does not currently support .NET. While the company indicates that this has not been a major sticking point, it has plans in the works to natively support .NET in the near future and to provide .NET and JSP-based programmatic interfaces to its content management engine and templating architecture. CommonSpot currently requires development in CFML (the ColdFusion markup language) to interface into and customize the product. Now on Version 4.0, CommonSpot has been named by ColdFusion Developer's Journal as the Best Content Management Tool for three years running (2001, 2002, 2003).

CommonSpot

CommonSpot has been in the Web publishing market in one way or another for six or seven years. As mentioned above, while it was named Best Content Management Tool by ColdFusion Developer's Journal, it is focused more acutely on Web publishing. The product's pricing lends well to the non-profit/education/association space, as well as mid-market private companies, which tend to have similar issues to their not-for-profit counterparts. In fact, PaperThin has many implementations in the government sector as well as corporations. Notable customers in these verticals include non-profits (Heritage Foundation, Kaiser Family Foundation), associations (AFL/CIO, National Cotton Council, Business Software Alliance), higher education (Ohio University, Cornell, Stanford, Vanderbilt), government (Department of Defense, Voice of America, Architect of the Capitol), and corporate (PGA.com, TRW, Booz-Allen-Hamilton).

In particular, a few of CommonSpot's characteristics are worth noting when considering the success PaperThin has in its target markets:

- **Low entry price:** Perhaps the thing that jumps out most immediately for certain organizations is the starting price of CommonSpot, which is just under \$20,000. As noted above, however, price is not the ideal way for companies to analyze a product. That being said, more than a few will eliminate or consider a potential solution based almost solely on this metric. CommonSpot gets dismissed from very few deals based on price.
- **Ease-of-use:** One of the most important aspects when considering CMS solutions is its ease-of-use. CommonSpot deploys an intuitive in-context, wizard driven editing environment that enables

organizations to empower their non-technical content contributors with a minimal amount of training. For example, MBA school Babson College has over 300 non-technical contributors composed of students and faculty that manage almost all aspects of the college's public Web site. With an hour's worth of training and a seven-page cheat sheet, contributors are able to immediately create and publish content.

- **Out-of-the-box functionality:** One reason that PaperThin is able to get solutions up and running so quickly is because much of CommonSpot works right out of the box. For example, the product boasts 50 elements that are ready for immediate use, including bread crumbs and a table of contents. This enables customers to use certain features almost immediately.
- **Implementation time:** Building on its out-of-box functionality, Common Spot has a relatively short implementation time for the full system. PaperThin reports that many of its implementations can take a matter of weeks, and generally require minimal resources from PaperThin or the organization.
- **Customization/integration support:** CommonSpot offers an increasing number of customization and integration points. Developers using CFML (and soon .NET or JSP) have control over the look and feel of a site, and can easily customize how CommonSpot renders content and integrates with other Web applications. For example, CommonSpot's rich integration capabilities enable associations and higher education institutions to authenticate against and access profile information from data stored in existing AMS (Association Management System) or Student/Alumni CRM systems.
- **Dynamic and static renderings:** CommonSpot's caching and content generation capabilities enable it to support the rendering of dynamic and static content on the same Web page. This combination, common with many of the enterprise content management solutions, is not always found in mid-market CMS products. This feature provides increased scalability and better site performance as only dynamic content is processed for each page hit. This is especially useful to sites that have a combination of structured and unstructured data, such as PGA.com (www.pga.com), where areas such as the latest scores are dynamically updated while golf tips from the pros are more static in nature.
- **Hosted Model:** One area that may end up being particularly beneficial for organizations looking for cost certainty is the hosted model. PaperThin offers this increasingly popular offering through several hosting partners. The customer leases the software for a monthly fee, which generally includes updates in the price.

These solution characteristics have shown to be attractive to PaperThin's core audience. To gain more insight into customers' wants and needs as well as provide an environment for customers to learn from each other, the company has just begun user groups. This move should provide the company with more insight into the thought processes of its customers, and it also brings the company in line with larger players in the industry.

Version 4.5 of CommonSpot, which is expected to be released in October, will extend language support to include full Unicode. It will also have support for Mac users, a feature important to a large portion of the educational market. In addition, look for a taxonomy add-on enabling association, universities, Federal government agencies, or any organization with an existing taxonomy to better organize and classify their content. The company considers its 4.5 version to be a major release, and the features seem to back up its thinking.

In Version 5.0 (due in late 2004 or early 2005), PaperThin plans to offer full support for .NET as well as more robust Web services and XML functionality. As an overall principle, the company is dedicated to extending its potential integration points with each new release. This trend will continue with Version 5.0.

InfoTrends/CAP Ventures' Perspective

With all the emphasis that is placed on Enterprise Content Management, you might believe that medium-sized, private companies such as PaperThin are becoming an endangered species. With consolidation, some say, only those companies that offer a full ECM suite and can provide a single platform will survive

independently. The other vendors will be acquired and rolled into the large solutions. As we have seen, however, certain markets require a product that offers strong capabilities for a relatively low price with minimal customization necessary to deploy. This is especially true in the verticals that PaperThin focuses on, including non-profit, associations, education, life sciences, and medium-sized companies. For these organizations, a large ECM implementation may not even be considered. A solution that is up and running quickly and can be scaled as needed offers a more valid option for these firms.

CommonSpot is a prime example of the type of product that can be successful, especially with some of the upgrades that are coming. Mac support will likely be a huge boost in the education sector, as well as in graphic arts and marketing departments of other organizations. Therefore, it is critical that any company playing in this space is well versed, and integrates well, with Macintosh products.

Along the same lines, PaperThin will also be including support for .NET and strengthening its offering to the J2EE platforms with the 5.0 release of CommonSpot. At this time, the product works solely with ColdFusion. PaperThin indicates that it does not lose many deals based on this fact, but there are doubtless some who do not even consider the company based on its inability to work with other popular technologies. With CommonSpot 5.0 providing native interfaces to J2EE and .NET, the company could see renewed activity with potential customers dedicated to those technologies. This removes one potential barrier for companies interested in the CommonSpot technology. Nevertheless, this move will also mean PaperThin will face stiffer competition from other vendors. Many of the company's current customers start with ColdFusion due to its combination of a low price point and wide ranging capabilities, then looked for a WCM solution to run on it. In this scenario, prospects largely found a match with PaperThin. The pool of potential solutions is much larger when competing in the J2EE and .NET world, so the company's marketing and positioning strategy will be the key to success in this new arena.

All in all, CommonSpot looks to be a reliable and realistic option for many companies considering a Web Content Management solution. Many of today's implementations are taking the place of home-grown solutions. PaperThin seems to have found the right combination of price and features that can tempt an organization to consider a packaged software offering. With the addition of Mac, J2EE, and .NET to its stable, the company's universe of potential customers should grow considerably. If PaperThin is up to the marketing challenge and can take advantage of this, the company's future will likely be bright.

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