Advanced Consulting Enterprises

Mapping Database Solutions to Your Needs

By Al Perlman

Guardianship Program of Dade County is a non-profit private agency that provides guardian services for indigent adults in Miami-Dade County in South Florida.

Unfortunately, in these tough economic times, business is booming.

The agency has a staff of about 40 people serving more than 1,000 individuals. Guardianship Program must be involved in all decisions – paying bills, medical treatments, rent – for each person in its system. Keeping track of each decision for each individual is no simple task.

"In effect, it's like having 1,000 general ledgers because you have to report back to the courts on every transaction," says Paul R. Stearns, the founder and President of Advanced Consulting Enterprises, Inc., a Miami Lakes, Fla. based solutions provider and consulting company that works with Guardianship Program on its IT installation.

"On the financial side," Stearns says, "think of it as 1,000 Quickbooks. But beyond that, they also need to keep track of other assets. In some cases a house, or stocks and bonds, or a reverse mortgage, plus all of the other aspects of the individual's care. You have to keep track of visits by case workers. You have to log documentation of what you're doing and why you're doing it."

To manage all of this, Guardianship Program is using Oracle Database and Oracle Developer Tools. Stearns is particularly proud of this deployment because it was his first Oracle installation, all the way back to 1992.

The fact that the agency is still running an Oracle database after all these years is testament to the strength of the Oracle product line and the commitment Oracle has made to retaining its leadership in the enterprise software market, Stearns says.

For Advanced Consulting Enterprises, Guardianship Program is a fairly typical deployment in the sense that the customer defined a problem and turned to Advanced Consulting as a trusted advisor to solve the problem.

"Our goal in life is to find the best solutions for our cus-

tomers and become part of their team as opposed to being a vendor," Stearns says. "Once your customer trusts you've got their best interests in mind, it's hard to get them to let go of you."

Philosophically, Stearns tries to be vendor-agnostic. However, since he began working with Oracle, he has become a big proponent of Oracle solutions, not just for databases, but for business intelligence, middleware and applications as well.

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"Once people recognized we had Oracle expertise, we started doing projects for other companies," Stearns says. "We've probably done 10 or so large applications. One of our largest customers is the Florida cancer registry. They have a database of millions of instances of cancer they keep up to date. They maintain an Oracle Data Warehouse providing their primary data consumers, the Florida Department of Health and the CDC, with the ability to do detailed statistical analysis on cancer rates, both from a population and geographical point of view. Due to the dedication of their staff and the Oracle technology they use, they have been able to achieve and maintain the highest national cer-

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tification for timeliness, completeness and quality of data collected."

Watching Out For the Customer

Stearns says many of his clients have specialized needs. He recalls one client that was about to buy a custom application from another solutions provider for a certain type of medical billing. The client quoted a price for the entire system – the Oracle Database, the specialized application and the fee to get the whole system up and running.

"They asked me to take a look at it," Stearns recalls. "They were a start-up company and were concerned about budgets. When I looked at it, I saw that they would be buying a whole lot more product than they needed. They were getting Oracle Database Standard Edition for a dual-processor machine, but they really needed a license for only 15 users. I told the customer they could spend $4,000 instead of $40,000."

With the help and support of Tech Data, Advanced Consulting Enterprise's Value Added Distributor for Oracle, Stearns took over the installation. "I'm still doing business with them," he says. "I know they thought, 'Hmmm, maybe he really does have our best interest in mind.'"

Not only was Tech Data supportive of the smaller sale, Oracle was as well.

Back To The Future

By design, Stearns keeps Advanced Consulting Enterprise rather small. At its height, it had 11 employees and about $3 million in revenue. Today, it has a team of five and about a half a million dollars in revenue. Stearns is proud of the fact that he doesn't have – or need – a sales staff.

As a smaller reseller, Stearns is extremely pleased with the efforts Oracle has made in the past few years to provide support for his company and others that may not be in a position to generate many millions of dollars in sales.

"I think of it as 'Back to the Future' with Oracle," he says. "A few years ago Oracle did not have an easy method for a reseller to buy a database and sell it as part of their day-in, day-out operations. You had to be an authorized partner. Nowadays, all you have to do is sign up and you can sell their products."

"These changes to support the smaller resellers have a big benefit, I think," Stearns says. "It allows a grassroots community to take hold, which is something Oracle has been lacking to some degree over the years. Oracle can't just sell on the fact that they have a high-quality product. The fact that they're lowering the cost of entry for smaller

resellers, they should reap big rewards down the road."

Advances in Pricing and 'User Friendliness Strategy'

As an independent solutions provider, Stearns has the option, basically, to sell any products he chooses. He believes strongly that Oracle's databases are still the most robust and reliable in the industry, and offer more capabilities and features than those from other vendors.

Where he has seen great progress from Oracle has been in adapting to some of the demands required to make their products attractive to mid-market customers and smaller resellers, particularly in pricing and in what Stearns calls "their user-friendliness strategy."

"They've gone a long way towards making the product more user-friendly," Stearns says. "You don't need to be a rocket scientist to install and maintain it. While Oracle is still robust and can still require the use of knowledgeable IT folks – if you use some of the arcane features – it has gotten to the point where regular people can do real applications."

Stearns cites as an example the Oracle Business Intelligence Suite and one of the products offered as part of that suite, Oracle Answers. Oracle Answers is a thin-client ad hoc reporting and analysis solution that enables end users to create their own reports and then drill down, analyze, visualize and embed the results in their own personalized dashboard.

"We did a demo for Guardianship Program where they want to be able to do their own reports and query by example," Stearns says. "We put together a presentation using their own data and we showed them how easy it would be for end users to put together their own reports and do BI-types of things. With Oracle Answers you have the ability to migrate the data analysis tools right into the hands of the people who need it. If somebody has a desire and some level of understanding of how their business operates – not of computers – it becomes quite usable."

While the deployment of Oracle Answers at Guardianship Program is built on an underlying Oracle database, one of the great advantages of Oracle's BI tools is that the underlying database does not necessarily have to be from Oracle. This makes it extremely flexible for vendors such as Advanced Consulting Enterprises to create scalable BI solutions for a wide variety of customers.

"This is an example of a tool that wasn't available from Oracle five years ago. It wasn't one of their core strengths. But they've really adapted," Stearns says. "Pricing is another area. It gets back to knowing your customer. You never want to sell more to a customer than what they need right now at this instant. The way the Oracle program works, there's very little, if any, penalty for buying user li-

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censes and upgrading your customers as their needs change.

"Oracle's got a good product. They're working towards a more user-friendly customer-centric business model," Stearns says. "This is a good thing. If they keep moving forward in that direction, they'll have nothing but success. They have sharp people doing the right things."

Advice For The Smaller Reseller (Without Going Overboard)

Stearns says that's about as effusive as he gets over ANY vendor. "I'm not an effusive type," he jokes. "My 15 year old son made a soufflé. He asked how it was. I told him it was edible. For me, that's effusive."

Still, while not necessarily effusive, Stearns is very pos-itive in the advice he would give to other smaller resellers who are considering Oracle. "My first piece of advice is know your customer," he says. "Really take a close look at your customer's needs and requirements.

"As far as Oracle," Stearns adds. "For resellers who are thinking about what Database to use, or BI, I would say, 'Come back in, the water's much better than it was. The folks at Oracle are making it much easier to partner with them.'"

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Al Perlman is co-founder and partner of New Reality Media. He is an award-winning journalist and publishing executive who has launched more than a dozen successful high tech media products, including Interactive Week, CRN, VARBusiness, Baseline, CIO Insight, CommunicationsWeek, Information Week and others.

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Working With Tech Data

As founder and President of Advanced Consulting Enterprises, Paul Stearns wears many hats. "Personally I do hardware, software, development, network implementations – and I'm a resource for all the people who work for me. I'm the generalist," Stearns says, with pride. He also is responsible for running the company.

"I can use all the help I can get," he jokes.

One of the biggest sources of help during the past year has been Tech Data, his Oracle Value Added Distributor. Tech Data is one of the largest VADs in the industry and has been part of the Oracle VAD Remarketer program since its launch in mid-2007.

"The good thing is they can get answers back to me quickly," Stearns says. "Because I wear so many hats, one of the things that's difficult for me is being able to sift through the myriad products available from so many vendors. Oracle is no exception.

"I have to find the best product for my customer and I have a dedicated Oracle team at Tech Data," Stearns adds. "I tell them, 'Hey, this is what I need' and I can bat it around with them because they're very knowledgeable."

Originality, Stearns says, is concealing your sources.

"Because of Tech Data, my customers think I'm a genius," he laughs. "Tech Data's Oracle team has been very positive and has helped me get several of the deals I've gotten."   *– Al Perlman*

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