

Information Builders enables agile information solutions with business intelligence (BI) and integration technologies. WebFOCUS – the most widely utilized business intelligence platform – connects to any enterprise system or application and enables simple and intuitive interaction with information.

Ace Hardware

Snapshot

Organization

With stores located in all 50 states and 70 countries, Ace Hardware is the largest retailer-owned hardware cooperative in the U.S. The company's 4,600 stores generate annual retail sales of more than \$12 billion.

Challenge

Extend decision-making capabilities to all types of internal and external users via BI capabilities that make information systems easy to access, integrate, and use.

Strategy

Convert existing reports to WebFOCUS reports; build a universal reporting platform to accommodate corporate users, customers, retail partners, and suppliers.

Results

Helps field staff monitor vendor performance and improve merchandising programs. Supplies 10,000 users with accurate information – wherever and whenever they need it and in a form that facilitates decision-making.

Information Builders Solution

WebFOCUS, InfoAssist, Active Reports, Quick Data, and Professional Services.



Ace Remodels Its Reporting System

National Retailer Finds WebFOCUS Is Built to Last

When Ace Hardware Corporation first began to retool its business intelligence (BI) strategy, the company's managers chose the WebFOCUS BI platform for its power, strength, and flexibility. Today, Ace has 10,000 WebFOCUS users accessing a tremendous variety of reports as well as dashboards and analytic functions. The platform helps Ace manage its internal operations while enabling both retailers and wholesalers to streamline their supply chains.

"We knew we needed a tool that would allow us to support thousands of users while easing development and offering more self-service capabilities," says Brian Cook, a software engineer at Ace who helped the company rewrite about 300 legacy reports in WebFOCUS. "After looking at a number of options, it was clear that WebFOCUS was the best solution for us."

"While remodeling our infrastructure, we pushed hard to show that WebFOCUS can step up to the plate and deliver a superior set of tools for this initiative, just like we did for our original business intelligence overhaul," adds Tim Brynda, a software

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engineering analyst at Ace who is spearheading many of Ace’s current BI efforts. “As a result, we went through a second cycle of proving that WebFOCUS was the right tool for us, and we couldn’t be happier with the results.”

Ace selected Information Builders from among several competing BI vendors, including Hyperion Solutions and Microsoft. According to Cook, his team favored WebFOCUS for its ease of development, scalability, and versatile data-access capabilities. They also liked how WebFOCUS offers simple nuts and bolts reporting capabilities for business users, as well as sophisticated analytical capabilities for professional developers – much like the merchandise in Ace stores that can serve the needs of both weekend hobbyists and professional contractors.

Ace is currently involved in a business transformation project, which involves replacing several legacy mainframe COBOL applications with SAP R/3 applications. Database administrators are also creating a new data warehouse for wholesale information using SAP business warehouse.

With information coming from so many types of information systems, Ace is glad to have an ERP-savvy BI environment that can integrate various types of data into user-friendly reports. WebFOCUS is installed on a Microsoft Windows platform and Ace’s data is stored primarily in Teradata, DB2, and FOCUS tables.

“WebFOCUS is very flexible, so we have plenty of data-access options,” says Cook. “It offers just about every possible orientation, whether it’s direct access, ETL, cross-platform, or report joins.” Additionally, says Cook, WebFOCUS scales to accommodate the needs of thousands of different users.

The Right BI Tools for the Job

Using WebFOCUS, Ace has developed parameterized reports for many departments across the corporation.

There are four basic groups of users:

- Ace stores – where merchandising managers run reports about inventory, promotions, and sales
- Field staff – responsible for activities at the stores and running reports on retail performance
- Ace vendors – who monitor how their inventory is moving
- Corporate users in finance, marketing, advertising, merchandising, and other departments

For example, marketing personnel use WebFOCUS to gauge the effects of specific promotions on sales and improve the Ace Rewards customer loyalty program. About 1,800 vendors use WebFOCUS parameterized reports to track how individual products are selling by region and time of year. This visibility helps the vendors forecast production needs, optimize product selection by discontinuing products that aren’t selling while emphasizing those that are, as well as develop forecasting models and sales plans.

On the retail side, regional managers can run point-of-sale reports to identify their best customers and target them with specific marketing campaigns. They can also monitor the top selling items in each territory and ensure those items are in stock at each location, maximizing sales opportunities.

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Business users in many departments depend on a WebFOCUS dashboard, which tracks daily sales at the retail and wholesale levels. This information helps the company gauge how various items are selling by region, division, and product category. About 1,500 users rely on this dashboard to access information that’s most pertinent to their jobs.

Structural Guidance From the Pros

Brynda and his team brought in Information Builders Professional Services to help them complete the dashboard project. “Thanks to the Information Builders staff, the dashboard is very slick and professional looking,” he says. “The consultants were very helpful and patient, and they were great at mediating among differing opinions, presenting many options and finding the perfect fit for us.”

Several Ace developers attended training classes sponsored by Information Builders’ education department. The classes included training on WebFOCUS Dialogue Manager (a scripting syntax) and WebFOCUS Report Painter (a graphical report-development tool). Ace also engaged the Professional Services organization to provide a combination of mentoring, knowledge transfer, and application development services.

“Information Builders has worked closely with our team to help us understand the right way to use the software,” says Cook. “They are very open to the things we have suggested, and very responsive about meeting our requirements. Information Builders seems to be aware of our needs and they work hard to make each project go smoothly.”

Building on a Solid Foundation

Ace plans to use WebFOCUS Active Reports to offer portable analytic options to field staff. These dynamic PDF reports will enable remote workers to analyze data without having to be connected to Ace’s intranet. “Our field staff is the bridge between Ace and our retailers,” Cook explains. “They know all of our merchandising programs and they work closely with dealers to monitor their performance and help them improve their businesses. Making their reporting environment more portable will be a real help to them.”

Guided Ad Hoc Reporting

WebFOCUS guided ad hoc technology lets users rapidly create custom reports as simply as if they were shopping online. They can easily choose columns, sort criteria, measures, and output formats to generate their own personal reports, and then output the results in any format including Excel, PDF, HTML, Word, or as an Active Report that allows for offline analysis. A single guided ad hoc reporting template can generate thousands of reports to meet many different business requirements.

With help from Information Builders Professional Services, Ace Hardware is building guided ad hoc sandboxes to empower end users to create their own reports and reduce reliance on the IT department.

Find Out More

To find out how our solutions can help your company succeed, talk to an Information Builders representative today. Contact your local Information Builders office, visit us at **informationbuilders.com**, or in the U.S. and Canada, call **(800) 969-4636**.

Ace also plans to use WebFOCUS InfoAssist to ease the pressure on skilled programmers, who currently handle most of the custom reporting services. InfoAssist features a user-friendly report development environment that helps non-technical people to devise queries, reports, charts, and dashboards. By enabling these business users to delve more deeply into the data with ad hoc reports, the company hopes to expand the number of power users in each department.

As the SAP implementation gains momentum, Ace is also using WebFOCUS for many new ERP reporting projects, such as helping the merchandising team obtain product information from the SAP sales and distribution module to identify quick-selling, high-margin products that retailers will want to carry. This ERP information will also be valuable to vendors researching a product's sales history, retail managers checking inventory levels, and many other internal and external users.

In addition to rewriting reports to point at SAP business warehouse instead of Teradata, a broader strategy was implemented to provide guided ad hoc sandboxes to users. By recognizing many common elements in existing reports, Ace was able to create logical groupings of data for each reporting area. Information Builders Professional Services helped build a guided BI prototype. Ace developers are now using that prototype to develop robust ad hoc sandboxes to empower end users and reduce reliance on IT to deliver new reports.

Finally, Ace plans to explore WebFOCUS Quick Data to allow business professionals to create ad hoc reports within Microsoft Excel. An Excel add-in file, Quick Data connects directly to the WebFOCUS reporting engine to let these users build reports that are automatically refreshed from enterprise data sources and combine multiple reports into a single worksheet.

"We couldn't have envisioned all of these BI projects when we purchased WebFOCUS, but the software has served us well as an enterprise standard," says Brynda. "Information Builders' support staff has been great. They give us confidence that we can achieve our goals while our business grows, develops, and builds upon itself."

