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## *ASNA Visual RPG Case Study:*

# **Central Grocers – Central Grocers maximizes customer service with ASNA Visual RPG**

By Roger Pence

## **Central Grocers maximizes customer service with ASNA Visual RPG**

Notoriously low profit margins and short shelf life demand that the grocery store business is driven by inventory turnover. There was a time when inventory could be managed by a walk through the store with a clipboard. Aggressive, pervasive competition (even Amazon is delivering groceries to homes now!), with finely-tuned inventory computer systems, long ago killed off old-fashioned, manual inventory management techniques.

Central Grocers is large grocery supply wholesaler based in Joliet, Illinois with about \$2 billion (yes, that's a "b"! ) dollars a year in sales. Central Grocers has been servicing Chicago area grocers for nearly 100 years (it was founded in 1917). Today, Central Grocers provides inventory (including produce, fresh meat, and frozen foods) to over 400 independent

### **At a glance...**

#### **Customer Profile:**

Central Grocers is a leading wholesaler grocer in the Chicago area. It services more than 400 independent grocers and posts sales of \$2 billion per year.

#### **Situation:**

When Central Grocers acquired Dearborn Wholesale Grocers it realized it needed to improve its online resources to match the kinds of services Dearborn customers were used to. It also needed to upgrade its back office operations to eliminate data entry redundancies and improve response times.

#### **Solution:**

Former Dearborn employees Fenton Doolin and John Bukauskas joined Central Grocers as System Analysts and quickly showed how ASNA Visual RPG for .NET could be used to quickly and affordably create a contemporary, comprehensive online portal for both Central Grocers' back office and its customers.

#### **Benefits:**

Central Grocers' customers create their own item movement queries. This streamlines the rebate manufacture process while eliminating keypunch efforts internally. The ASNA based solution provides this service and many others, including the First Time Buy application. This assists Central Grocers' with the objective to enhance the retailers experience with Central Grocers as their grocery supplier.

#### **Products:**

ASNA Visual RPG, ASNA DataGate, Windows 2012 Web Server

Chicagoland grocery stores. To maintain its competitive advantage, Central Grocers turned to ASNA's Visual RPG to create a contemporary, comprehensive online portal for itself and its customers.

## **Crank the clock back**

Fenton Doolin and John Bukauskas, both now employed at Central Grocers as Systems Analysts, used to work as developers at Dearborn Wholesale Grocers, also in the Chicago area. It was at Dearborn where the pair cut their teeth on AVR. The Dearborn development team used the COM version of AVR to create many Windows-based Web and fat client solutions. Connecting directly to the AS/400 (as we called it back then) with secure and performant read/write DB access through ASNA DataGate, these apps filled crucial gaps to modernize the back office operations at Dearborn.

Doolin recalls, "We used AVR heavily in our days at Dearborn. Its fidelity with RPG syntax and idioms made it easy to learn. Consequently, we created many superb Windows and Web-based solutions with it. We primarily focused on using the COM of AVR, but we did later use AVR for .NET for some projects."

In late 2012, Central Grocers acquired Dearborn Wholesale. Initially, Doolin, Bukauskas, and other members of the Dearborn development team, scurried to find employment. Alas, Central Grocers to rescue.

Dearborn had built a strong customer service reputation with its loyal customer base. The reality quickly surfaced that if Central Grocers was going to keep its newly-acquired Dearborn customers, it needed to improve and streamline its online services to customers.

"Central Grocers hired three of us from Dearborn to help modernize its online services and provide a higher level of IBM i system knowledge. At the time, most of Central Grocers' online presence was static PDF files—there were very little online interactive capabilities for either Central Grocers' staff or its customers. We were quite excited to jump in and start creating new solutions for Central Grocers," says Doolin.

## **The modern IBM i**

Central Grocers has been an IBM midrange shop for several years, primarily using it for Infor's M3 ERP solution. Before the Dearborn acquisition, it didn't play much of a direct role with its online tools or functionality. Doolin told Central Grocers execs about ASNA Visual RPG and explained how it can be used to build modern browser-based apps that take great advantage of all of the attributes of the IBM i. He quickly got the green light to use

AVR to start architecting a new, interactive customer portal to replace the static PDF pages.

“At first, we were a little behind the 8-ball with ASNA’s Visual RPG for .NET. At Dearborn, we had legacy AVR Classic code and it made sense for us to stay on that path most of the time. But when it came to building new software for Central Grocers, I knew we had to jump 100% into AVR for .NET. Having been personally involved with ASNA for many years, I knew I could count on ASNA to provide the training we needed to quickly get up to speed with AVR for .NET.”

Having spent 20 years in the grocery business, Doolin drew on his customer service experience to help ensure former Dearborn customers were kept happy. Coupled with Bukauskas’s knowledge of the ASNA environment and his IBM i infrastructure expertise the project was off to a fast start. Beyond maintaining the status quo with Dearborn customers, the team was also charged with making the existing Central Grocers’ customers realize the potential in accepting new processes and systems. His first efforts were to create an online order entry presence. These early efforts removed keypunch efforts while providing customers the capability to confirm the receiving of orders from the more traditional handheld used for ordering.

Special efforts were made early on to make immediate payoffs very clear and tangible to users. For example, manufacturer rebates are a staple of the grocery business. These rebates are dependent on accurate record keeping and reporting of product turnover—they provide the incentive to effectively rotating your stock (remember, a grocery store, and in turn a manufacturer, only makes money with high turnovers).

Explains Doolin, “In the old days, our internal office personnel were required to create inquiries through our integrated system to provide the necessary information to customers related to retailer manufacture rebates. With our new system in place, existing Central Grocer customers were happy to learn that they are now able to create their own movement reports. This new feature facilitated the data retrieval process for customers, while saving internal personnel time and effort. This tool also allows customers to quickly distinguish slow moving items from the fast movers.

Other baked-in benefits included:

- Orders are placed from retailers with handheld devices. Data is transmitted from these devices to Central Grocers. Today, not only is order processing automated, but customers can now view order status online and make corrections/additions if needed.
- In the grocery industry, scanning product at the register is a mainstay. When new

product arrives at a store, the item information must be entered into a store's system immediately to avoid consumers being delayed within the checkout process. The new web application allows retailers to identify First Time Buys(FTB), either by selecting a dynamic date range or by using the Invoice Inquiry to recognize first time buys at an invoice level. This provides the retailer the visibility necessary to enter the item information into the store's system while avoiding price check scenarios at the checkout counters.

## The right product for the problem

The new system isn't done, but the components in place are a run-away success and many more components are coming. Figures 1 and 2 are current screen shots of the app. By all accounts, Doolin and his team are doing a great job for Central Grocers. But, Doolin is also quick to put much of the credit back on ASNA Visual RPG.

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## About ASNA

In its fourth decade as a market leader and innovator for IBM midrange systems, ASNA provides comprehensive and flexible solutions for modernizing IBM i applications to the Microsoft .NET platform.

ASNA enables companies to integrate and extend their RPG green screen solutions to .NET, the Web and Mobile, while preserving investments in IT and human resources. Our solutions are distributed worldwide and used by more than a million end users.

ASNA holds a Microsoft Gold competency in Application Development, is a Microsoft Visual Studio Industry Partner, an Advanced Tier Member of IBM's PartnerWorld for Developers and a Gold level partner of Microsoft's Platform Modernization Alliance.