PARADE-System i .NET Extension

PARADE is the most widely read magazine in the United States, appearing in more than 440 newspapers nationwide, with a circulation of 32 million and a readership of 71 million.

Challenge

Maintaining such success with a print publication in the Internet age requires staying on the cutting edge of technology, and PARADE Publications continues to do that with ASNA products.

PARADE has already been a user of ASNA's Visual RPG (AVR) for years, using it to build a system that lets its Apple Macintosh users communicate with corporate System i machines. Recently, it used ASNA's AVR for .NET and DataGate for .NET to create a new system that lets advertising and editorial staff plan and build individual magazines online.

Planning magazine pages isn't a simple matter of just assigning blocks of pages to editorial content and ads. Articles and ads are of varying sizes, sometimes there are specific page-placement priorities for both, and often there are last-minute changes to the numbers and sizes of ads. Before 2008, PARADE used a drawing program to create a layout report of the content and page order to guide the printing process, but this required cumbersome pencil-and-paper adjustments for late changes. Leaving out a late ad just because it didn't fit the current page layout wasn't an option. Such problems and shorter press schedules put pressure on PARADE to find a better solution than arbitrarily tightening its advertiser deadlines.

At first, a corporate task force looked for a software package that might provide an answer, but research showed that would be an expensive option. Even the best fit among products designed for publication production work would require extensive customization and a very substantial price tag.

"In the end, the choice came down to a third-party system or to build our own," recalls David Chang, PARADE Senior Manager of Technical Applications. The task force decided the company should design its own solution, based on past success using ASNA Visual RPG to build other corporate software systems.

At a glance...

Problem:

PARADE needed a more efficient method to replace many manual and time-consuming processes for laying out the magazine's editorial and advertising contents.

Solution:

Using ASNA Visual RPG and DataGate, PARADE built an application that lets non-technical users open databases and use drag-and-drop tools to move ads and editorial content to create page layout templates for the magazine.

Results:

- *Saves time and money over previous manual layout methods*

- *Lets sales director try "what-if" ad arrangement scenarios quickly and easily*

- *Avoids heavy I/O overhead for corporate databases by using ADO.NET as a temporary in-memory database*

Products:

AVR.NET, DataGate, Visual Studio .NET

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A New Wheel to Do the Turning— ASNA Solution

Bernie Bialt – an AVR.NET consultant who was highly recommended by ASNA-worked on-site, directly with PARADE at its New York City headquarters. Senior management put faith in the new plan because of the lower projected cost, the excellent track record of AVR's use in creating other corporate systems, and the fact that using AVR wouldn't force the IT staff to maintain software written in an unfamiliar language. to these applications."

The biggest challenge facing the design team was that an ideal solution didn't exist. It had to be invented. None of the third-party products the task force had considered was a good model, and the partly manual system already in use was clearly not the best idea either. "Users had their broad-stroke requirements and we had a vision of the AVR.NET system, but detailed specifications were lacking," Chang notes. "So, users had a hard time providing the specifics until they saw each iteration and the project was prolonged as critical features were constantly being added." Were they to do the project over, Chang speculates, they would use a rapid prototyping methodology to help users better visualize the system's functionality.

With AVR's strong ability to allow rapid prototyping, PARADE built its Book Makeup System (BMU), a graphical, Windows-based system that uses 100 percent AVR.NET code. BMU gives end users a GUI that lets them drag and drop contents onto magazine page templates, automates importation of data from different page layout versions without affecting items already placed on pages, and generates a final layout report that prints directly from the

system. The GUI offers three panels: a tree view of all pages, a two-column list view, and a layout view that resembles actual magazine pages. Users can move objects between all three panels with a mouse, overlap objects between panels, or insert items between other objects. Users can place advertisements and editorial stories onto the list or layout panels, which under the old system would have caused major delays. The page data is saved to a System i, which uses text-based emulation programs on that platform for the next step in the magazine-production process. Another helpful feature of the solution is use of ASNA's DataGate, which lets PARADE's markup program access data rapidly, by providing a fast in-memory store of critical data (using Microsoft ADO.NET). This means planners can make numerous changes without each one contributing to an already heavy load on PARADE's databases. In addition, the new PARADE markup system lets the Ad Sales Administration Director use it as a "what-if" analysis tool for trying out different ad configurations.

"All of our home-grown Windows-based or browser-based systems have been created using AVR Classic or AVR.NET. We have strong in-house expertise using the language and our System i is still the backbone of the company's operation. Using ASNA's AVR with DataGate was a natural choice."

David Chang
PARADE Senior Manager of Technical Applications

Where the Rubber Meets the Road— Project Benefits

Launched in January 2008, BMU saves hours of time and effort for PARADE's magazine planners. Chang reports the system's ease of use, seamless database integration, and low total cost of ownership have made building BMU with ASNA products a more economical solution than buying a third-party package. Planning for a second version that will become a "central command" application for the production department is already underway.

About ASNA

ASNA, provides comprehensive and flexible solutions for modernizing IBM i applications to the Microsoft .NET platform. ASNA enables companies to integrate and extend their solutions to .NET, the Web and beyond, while preserving investments in IT and human resources. ASNA solutions are distributed worldwide and used by more than a million end users.

ASNA is a Gold Level partner of Microsoft's Partner Network, Microsoft Visual Studio Industry Partner, and an Advanced Tier Member of IBM's PartnerWorld for Developers. ASNA is also a gold level partner of Microsoft's Platform Modernization Alliance.