

**Phantom Fireworks teams IBM System i hardware with
a BI solution and ERP software to launch reports**

A Reason to Celebrate

BY JIM UTSLER

There's nothing quite like the oohs and aahs of Fourth-of-July fireworks. It brings out the kid in everyone, whether they're attending a fireworks display at the local park, putting on a mini-show of their own or running around the backyard with sparklers.

This summertime staple is thanks in large part to companies such as Phantom Fireworks, which distributes many varieties of consumer fireworks via 50 storefronts—some 15 to 20 are open year-round—and 1,200 or so temporary stands that pop onto the landscape at this time of year. “During this season, particularly in June, we probably have 2,000 people working for the company, up from the 200 fulltime employees we have at our Youngstown [Ohio] headquarters and another 200 at our satellite locations,” notes Mike Koocher, CIO with B.J. Alan, owner and operator of Phantom Fireworks.

With its explosion of growth during the Fourth-of-July period, as well as the weeks leading up to New Year's Day, Phantom also has a unique business model and some unique business requirements, not the least of which includes reporting. After all, the company's management must know how well the company is performing not only throughout the year, but also during those crucial four to six weeks leading up to its biggest selling periods.

Phantom turned to New Generation Software (NGS) and its NGS-IQ BI solution. Phantom can now keep on top of its business, giving decision makers the information they need to ensure the company can inspire the spectacle of Fourth-of-July fireworks.

Setting Them Up

As humble beginnings go, few companies can trump Phantom. According to Koocher, the concept for the business began in the back of a station wagon, which B.J. Alan founder Bruce Zoldan used to sell fireworks. (The car was his mother's.) "Bruce took a few weeks off from working at his uncle's wholesale distribution company to sell fireworks," Koocher says. "He came back at the end of the summer and showed off a shoebox full of money. That's what got him started, and he soon met a gentleman from China who brokered goods from a fireworks factory—and the rest, as they say, is history."

That history now includes the permanent storefronts and seasonal stands that sell what Koocher calls "class C consumer fireworks." As he further explains, "They mimic the displays you'll see at Macy's or other professional fireworks shows, but they're smaller. They don't go up as high, and they don't make as much noise. We also sell these 500-gram aerial repeaters, which have anywhere from 16 to 200 shots apiece. So you light this small box up, step back and watch the show."

Although Phantom imports most of these fireworks, it owns a company—Diamond Sparklers—that manufactures, well, sparklers. It's the last company in the United States to do so. Phantom also assembles assortment fireworks packages, using imported fireworks to create variety packs. "You can buy one of our 50 different assortments and get a wide range of effects and colors," Koocher says.

The company sells its products through several channels. These include permanent point of sale, temporary tents and stands, limited wholesale and big-box store distribution. In the latter case, Phantom will go to the store and set up displays. The company also has a Web site, although, for legal reasons, it doesn't accept online orders for fireworks (specialty items such as T-shirts are available). The site, www.fireworks.com,

does, however, offer product descriptions, location references and fireworks-safety tips. Notably, customers can call the company to place what Koocher calls "telemarketing orders," which can be picked up by the customers at local outlets.

With so many different distribution methods, Phantom requires a solid IT infrastructure. In this case, that includes two IBM® System i® 270s, one used for production and the other for development. The production box runs the VAI ERP application from Vormittag Associates Inc., which supports a number of financial and operational functions, including all of Phantom's accounting needs and inventory, order entry, purchasing and manufacturing. The company also uses the NGS software and Formtastic from Quadrant Software, the latter to produce electronic documents (and reduce its reliance on preprinted forms) and assist with barcoding and labeling.

Lighting the Fuse

As is evident by Phantom's many forms of importing, manufacturing, packaging and, most important, distribution, the company has a lot to keep track of—especially during its busy periods. As a result, reports are a necessity, giving management a way to track all of the comings and goings of company products.

Rather than customize the VAI reports, the company began investigating ways to more resourcefully create and deliver reports tailored to individual users. This would

help the company in a number of ways, including lowering the cost of report development and creating more efficient reports, each one built for individual users.

This is when Koocher, who had been the MIS director for a New York City-based law firm, moved to Youngstown to become Phantom's CIO. "I knew I could bring peace to the land and happiness to all," he quips. Although this statement may be in jest, he was serious about making sure everyone got the assistance they needed, including the all-essential reports.

As part of that epic undertaking, Koocher attended a VAI user meeting. There, he learned more about VAI and heard from customers who were more than pleased with the ERP package. Although he hadn't dealt with VAI before, he came away from the conference with valuable knowledge he could now share with Phantom and its management. More

UP CLOSE

CUSTOMER: Phantom Fireworks

HEADQUARTERS: Youngstown, Ohio

BUSINESS: Fireworks retailer and distributor

HARDWARE: Two IBM System i 270s

SOFTWARE: NGS-IQ BI solution, Vormittag Associates' ERP software and Formtastic from Quadrant Software

CHALLENGE: Creating reports to help company management make crucial decisions

SOLUTION: Writing reports tailored for individual users

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significantly, however, he also ran into vendors who were showing off their wares at the user meeting.

One of them happened to be NGS. “I’d worked with the query on the [System i platform] for years, and I’d always had a list of things I wished it could do,” Koocher remarks. “NGS-IQ does them all. It made writing reports and interactive queries much easier to perform, and I can import data into Excel. The latest version of VAI offers this, but we haven’t updated, so NGS-IQ fills that gap.”

And Koocher wasted no time leveraging this capability. He quickly wrote a bunch of reports and ported them to Excel spreadsheets. He then e-mailed them to several locations so users could look at sales by customer, product, etc. Although users can write their own reports, Koocher often finds it easier to do it for them, pulling, for example, “the order file and the customer file into an Excel spreadsheet, and then sending one version to California, another to Connecticut, one to Florida and one to the retail stores,” he says. “In 30 minutes, I had what would have taken several days without the program. I’ve never found it so easy to get information from the System i hardware into an Excel spreadsheet without having to create a comma-separated file.”


For those interested in creating their own reports, Koocher will sit down with them to teach them how to use the NGS software. “I’ve been able to train people who swore they couldn’t do any programming, and I showed them the errors of their ways,” he says.

Significantly, these Excel files can be automatically refreshed. As a result, when an executive comes into the office in the morning, he or she can click on the file, and it will be updated on the fly. By utilizing another NGS product, SmartView, users can then drill down through the data as needed or simply use the provided information, which might come from a point of sale, wholesale orders or warehouse shipments, to help them make decisions. “These people are getting their reports every morning—or whenever else they need them—and they’re not calling me screaming about it,” Koocher jokes. This simplicity is further bolstered by the ability of NGS-IQ report writers to tailor and secure the reports depending on user need and access.

Koocher can also use the application to create PDFs of requested data, something he’s doing in response to user requests. Koocher says, “By creating PDFs of the same reports, users can now use the magnifying tool to zoom in on portions of the text, making them much more readable.”

Pleased with what he’s done so far with NGS-IQ, Koocher is also looking at ways he can use NGS’s SmartView and Qport Builder modules for analysis and query building. This will, for example, allow the company president to view data in multiple ways, including side-by-side comparisons for year-to-year sales. “All he would have to do is log on to the network and SmartView will present the information to him,” Koocher says.

Enjoying the Show

When fireworks are going off this Fourth of July, people will sit back and marvel in their hissing, booming, banging glory. The behind-the-scenes distribution of them shouldn’t even come to mind. And thanks to companies such as Phantom, they likely won’t. The company has taken great strides to ensure that the fireworks experience is as enjoyable, not to mention as safe, as possible, with its back-office systems, including VAI and NGS-IQ, now ensuring that the show will go on. 



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