

HOW ALASKA AIRLINES MAKES PROGRESS



BRIDGING THE INFORMATION GAP

The air travel industry is an intensely competitive, customer-focused business. Airlines must be innovative to compete successfully, and the quest to give customers what they want is relentless. Superior customer service is the top priority, and Alaska Airlines is among the industry leaders going the extra mile to ensure passenger satisfaction.

Accordingly, when the idea of frequent flyer benefits originated, Alaska Airlines was quick to catch the wave. The program was very successful, and Alaska Airlines' customer service center was deluged by member telephone inquiries.

Alaska Airlines' Senior Web Systems Specialist Wayne Seward proposed a new direction to help customers access plan information via the Internet. Because the corporate mainframe, loaded with data relating to Alaska Airlines' mileage plan and member accounts, was of intense interest to customers, Seward proposed making the data available online.

Simultaneously, Seward tackled another challenge—Alaska Airlines also needed to provide client/server access to its Revenue Accounting System by creating IMS transactions from the client and IMS commands in Visual Basic. While these improvements made perfect sense, the cost of trying to create such access to IMS data was potentially

Alaska Airlines

CHALLENGE

Enable customers to access and manage mileage plan data residing in an IMS environment on the corporate mainframe

SOLUTION

Integrate mainframe and non-mainframe data sources efficiently and cost-effectively with Progress® DataDirect® Shadow® z/Direct

BENEFIT

Increase in online, frequent flyer visitors from 10,000 to 500,000 per week; reducing costs by \$1 million per year

prohibitive. Over the years, Alaska Airlines' mainframe had become an island, its critical information inaccessible from a client/server setting without complicated programming or a Web server environment. The challenge for Seward and his Alaska Airlines colleagues was how to overcome these obstacles and gain access to the gold mine of data without installing expensive, and potentially fallible, hardware and gateways between PCs and the mainframe.

UNLOCKING THE DATA

The solution was the Progress® DataDirect® Shadow® z/Direct product, which enables the integration of mainframe and non-mainframe data sources efficiently and cost-effectively. Seward, fresh off a programming class, was convinced that the mileage plan information could be made accessible from a Web server with the right solution. Impressed with Shadow z/Direct, Seward convinced his company to purchase the product. Then, Seward went to work.

He didn't have to work for very long. In less than two months, Seward moved from concept to finished product, building the application using Shadow z/Direct. The gold mine of data that had been locked inside the mainframe became available online, and the rush was on for information access.

ONLINE—AND ON TARGET

"The web site was wildly successful," said Seward. "We immediately experienced a decrease in the high volume of phone activity to our service center. Members began going online to answer their own questions regarding their mileage status and activity."

When Alaska Airlines brought the mainframe forward, activity on the site was high. In the beginning, Alaska Airlines' frequent flyers accessed the site 10,000 times per week. Then, the online program really took off. Since April 2000, nearly 230,000 new members have enrolled in the mileage plan online. To date (2002), approximately 3.8 million members are enrolled in the program with individual visitor access to the site registering at 500,000 times weekly.

For Alaska Airlines' Revenue Accounting System and other internal customers, the processes ran more quickly, and the Visual Basic environment substantially surpassed the previous mainframe screen design.

Alaska Airlines uses Shadow z/Direct in a 3-tier implementation as a Web server for the mileage plan, connected to the IMS mainframe database, to provide client/server access for the Revenue Accounting System. These implementations of Shadow z/Direct highlight just a few of many techniques DataDirect Technologies provides for enabling IMS data and transactions in the corporate enterprise.

MEETING CUSTOMER DEMAND

The data and options available on the website, which contains information for both Alaska Airlines and its partner, Horizon Air, have expanded dramatically to meet demand.

“Our customers are always asking for more features. It has been very interesting to see the results gained from opening this data source and making it easy to navigate,” said Seward. “Interest and demand for the site has grown intensely. It’s difficult to keep up—a problem I’m happy to have.”

Members of the online program have a wealth of information and options at their fingertips. The mileage plan page allows members to check accounts, request mileage credits, redeem or debit mileage for tickets, make reservations for Alaska Airlines and Horizon Air flights, upgrade flights to first class using mileage credits, and even donate mileage to the Red Cross. New members can enroll via the site as well and locate information, guidelines, and a Q&A about all aspects of the plan.

BENEFITS OF SHADOW Z/DIRECT

The implementation of Shadow z/Direct at Alaska Airlines has yielded several benefits, observed Seward. The resulting user-friendly applications for end-users, whether they are Visual Basic clients or Web browsers, are just one major benefit—ease of implementation is another.

“This solution was put into production very quickly,” noted Seward. “Shadow is easy to use and configure. As long as our programmers knew IMS, they were able to go to work with minimal technical intervention. When we experienced a few inevitable growing pains, DataDirect was right there showing us how to work through them.”

With Shadow z/Direct, Alaska Airlines realized the benefit of being able to access IMS in three different ways: to create IMS transactions, to develop IMS commands in Visual Basic, and to write remote procedure calls written for IMS access.

Unanticipated benefits of implementing Shadow z/Direct were also realized. Alaska Airlines did not expect or plan on a dramatic improvement in efficiency, but efficiency improved dramatically. Timeconsuming and high-volume telephone activity related to the frequent flyer program was reduced significantly, which relieved Alaska Airlines of the need to increase headcount to accommodate call volume. Further, as the online program caught on, Alaska Airlines was able to reduce its mileage plan call center staff by 50% for an estimated savings of \$1 million annually. As other groups within the company began using Shadow

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*Wayne Steward
Senior Web Systems Specialist
Alaska Airlines*

z/Direct to write additional client/server applications, said Seward, “Shadow sort of came to the forefront and worked its way into multiple productions,” repeating the efficiencies with each new application.

As Seward details the mileage plan and Web access for Alaska Airlines’ customers, his enthusiasm is evident. “Clients are much more autonomous now and no longer depend on our availability for a detailed transcript of their account information. They also learn more about their current options under the plan by freely navigating the site. Plus, the Internet is available 24X7, which is obviously more convenient than only being able to conduct transactions during regular business hours,” said Seward. “The end-result is a better-informed, happier Alaska Airlines customer and mileage plan member. Customers are empowered with Web access to a wide variety of personal information and options, giving them the chance to get the most out of their membership.”

CUSTOMER SATISFACTION, TECHNICAL LEADERSHIP

For Alaska Airlines, bridging access to valuable IMS data through the use of Shadow z/Direct serves the company’s ultimate goals perfectly. “Alaska Airlines is known for its customer service and technical leadership,” Seward explained. “This is a marriage of those two things—sharing the information in demand and helping members make the most of Alaska Airlines’ services. That’s what we’re all about, and DataDirect’s Shadow z/Direct has played a big part in helping us live up to our reputation and reach our customer-satisfaction goals.”

PROGRESS SOFTWARE

Progress Software Corporation (NASDAQ: PRGS) is a global software company that enables enterprises to be operationally responsive to changing conditions and customer interactions as they occur. Our goal is to enable our customers to capitalize on new opportunities, drive greater efficiencies, and reduce risk. Progress offers a comprehensive portfolio of best-in-class infrastructure software spanning event-driven visibility and real-time response, open integration, data access and integration, and application development and management—all supporting on-premises and SaaS/cloud deployments. Progress maximizes the benefits of operational responsiveness while minimizing IT complexity and total cost of ownership.

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