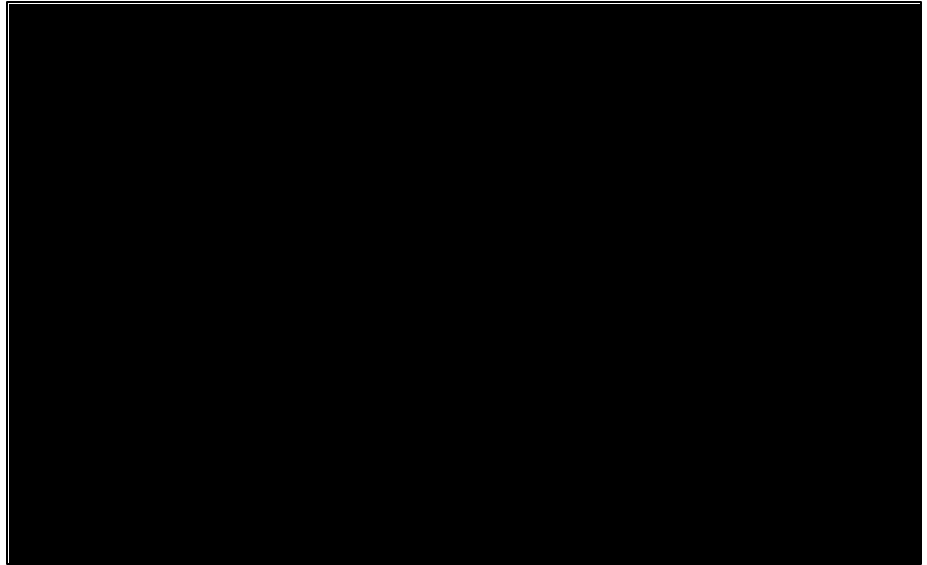


Polaroid Moves from Paper to Macintosh Computers

Macintosh computer technology helped to reduce paper documents at Polaroid with access to on-line information.



Company Background

In a mature, highly competitive market, one of the best ways to distinguish yourself from your competitors is through customer service. Polaroid Corporation was one of the first companies to offer a toll-free number for customers to call with questions on everything from camera prices to the closest film store. Now the company handles a million customer contact each year through its Consumer Services division.

To support the consumer services reps who handle Polaroid's toll-free line, the company installed 30 Apple Macintosh computers. The systems are linked to a customer database, which is on a Digital VAX 6220 mainframe, via an EtherTalk network with a T1 bridge. The group accesses the Ingres database, which stores Polaroid's customer information, using the Data Access Language (DAL) from Apple.

Macintosh Gives a Competitive Edge

"In consumer services we're committed to providing excellent service to customers by answering questions and repairing products. The Macintosh also makes it easier for us to share information with other divisions. There was no system that allowed

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us to do that before. Now we provide feedback to the corporation on what prompts customers to call us in the first place. This helps us to design better products, put together more effective sales and marketing programs, and remain competitive in the marketplace," says Roberta Hurtig, director of the consumer services division.

According to Florence Farnsworth, a senior systems analyst at Polaroid, the ability to capture information, analyze it, and share it with other departments has not only given Polaroid an edge against its competition, but it has also raised the group's profile among other divisions: "Having a powerful computing system like the Macintosh behind consumer services is an advantage. It's one thing to talk to other departments about trends and quite another to show them published results. It gives us more clout."

Macintosh Alternative Saved 75%

"A year ago we were a paper culture," says Tim Crawford, information systems manager at Polaroid. "Our consumer rep had a telephone and 20 to 30 technical information manuals containing product information, pricing data, and information on Polaroid dealers. We knew there had to be a better way to handle the process." Macintosh computers were not widely used in the corporation at the time, so there was some concern about bringing in a new computing platform without support personnel in place. "This was our first Macintosh-based system. It was not met with overwhelming support in Polaroid's IS community," says Crawford. "But its ease of use, the graphical interfaces, and the cost savings allowed the program to proceed.

"There were two things that really tipped the scales in selling this project to management," he continues. "One was the cost savings." Crawford demonstrated that he would be able to off-load a significant amount of work to the Macintosh, which meant he did not need to buy a dedicated VAX for the consumer services group as originally planned. "Because we could use existing VAX capacity together with the Macintosh, we were able to reduce the project cost to 25% of the budgeted cost," he says.

"The second deciding factor was the ability to incorporate graphics and text to do the classical data acquisition and display on screen. That really caught management's eye and got the system funded.

"The HyperCard frontend we created allows us to use a graphical interface," explains Crawford. "No other system has the ability to incorporate graphics and textual data capture. We've included an exploded parts diagram that allows consumer services rep to click parts of a camera to find out part numbers and other information. There's a map of Polaroid dealers presented graphically, as

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opposed to a straight listing. These are things that a purely VAX-based solution could not deliver at the same price point as the Macintosh.”

A Flexible Programming Environment

Crawford had about a month of programming experience with HyperCard before he launched the program, but he found that together with DAL, it was an extremely flexible development environment. “HyperCard is a very powerful development tool. I could incorporate the graphic elements and place buttons on the screen anywhere I wanted. And with DAL there’s no real limit to what you can do in a data acquisition sense. It has all of the functionality of SQL, plus the communications functionality that allows the user to communicate effortlessly with the corporate databases.”

DAL was critical to the consumer services group’s success, agrees Florence Farnsworth. “We were already committed to using Ingres because it had been purchased and licensed for use by the rest of the corporation,” she says. “We had to have a way to link the Macintosh computers to the Ingres database. DAL was the piece that made it all fall into place.”

Consistent, Accurate Information

The Macintosh system enables repst to provide customers with quality information. Explains Carl Kelley, manager of consumer services, “It’s very important to have consistent, accurate information going out to the customer. Before the computers were in place, we had to count on our consumer repst to have the most updated information and interpret it properly. Now all information on the Macintosh is updated from a central source. As a result, we can offer consistent, quality information on a timely basis.”

Macintosh: The Right Tool for the Job

“The Macintosh is a very strong IS solution for a couple of reasons,” explains Crawford. “It has the ability to put up the text data, capture type of screens, and it can be used as a productivity tool. The Macintosh is a window into corporate mainframes or minicomputers. It combines transparent access to corporate databases along with an easy-to-use interface and multitasking capability. Other computers don’t have the combined host access, networking, graphics, and personal computer all in one package. It’s the right tool for the job here.”

Polaroid plans to have up to 50 users on the system, mostly in consumer services’ primary offices in Cambridge and a few additional users at each of Polaroid’s four distribution centers around the country. All users will be linked to a corporate minicomputer in Waltham, Massachusetts.

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Macintosh Fits into Corporate Goals

Hurtig finds that “By having on-line information about products, programs, promotions, and dealer stock, customer services representatives are better equipped to give faster, more accurate information, and offer an overall higher level of service to customers.”

“It’s a lot easier to retain a customer than it is to find a new one,” adds Crawford. “Therefore, providing the consumer services rep with the best possible tool to provide good service is critical. With its graphical user interface, ease of access to corporate data, and cost-effectiveness, Macintosh fits right into our corporate goals.”