The Athlete's Foot RUNS into the Future

by Rick Lawson
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"We're committed to the IBM AS/400 as our platform for all future applications. That's why finding a flexible, yet powerful AS/400-based polling package was critical to our communication strategy," said Larry Hays, Manager of Computer Operations for The Athlete's Foot retail chain.

The Athlete's Foot, founded over twenty years ago, is an international retail chain of specialty footwear. Innovative from the start, they were the first chain to target footwear for athletes. Three years ago, The Athlete's Foot had a S/38, Mod 600. Rapidly expanding business requirements warranted migrating to an AS/400, Mod D60 with plans to add an E35.

Growth impacted office and warehouse space as well. In June, The Athlete's Foot moved their international headquarters to a newly built, customized facility in Kennesaw, GA. Utilizing state-of-the-art technology, their distribution center supplies over 250 corporate owned retail stores and many of the over 375 franchised Athlete's Foot stores.

The communications requirements for maintaining such an extensive network are specific and time sensitive. Retail stores report up through 21 district offices and 3 regional offices. In addition to polling of "Tlog" sales data collected by IBM 4684 devices in corporate owned stores, the district offices transmit a range of reports and data to the HQ's AS/400 for daily processing. By 7:00 each morning, polling must be completed in all locations. At that time, the AS/400 produces and distributes critical management reports to key decision makers.

When The Athlete's Foot considered future expansion, the MIS staff determined that their PC-based front end polling package would no longer be suitable. Several limitations in both the software and vendor performance led to this decision.

Expansion was expensive since a PC was required for every 4 lines. Given that most PC-based solutions are "shrink wrapped," changes to the software were difficult. As the enhancement requests grew, vendor performance lagged. Efficiency suffered since the addition of an intermediate step of moving polled information from the PC to the AS/400. Data was occasionally lost and translation errors occurred between the PC and AS/400. Most importantly, without seamless integration, the full power of the AS/400 couldn't be incorporated into the communications function.

These factors convinced The Athlete's Foot that an AS/400-based communications solution was a key ingredient for handling their expansion plans. They generated a list of requirements, and the evaluation process began.

The polling package had to support asynchronous polling to avoid replacing the 250 asynchronous modems already installed on the 4684s. The software had to be RPG-based and provide a smooth interface with the merchandising and other AS/400 application software. They needed a powerful scheduler, that had flexible group polling options to support communications across multiple time zones. It had to provide function that would get the PC and a mix of other vendor products out from between the AS/400 and the stores. Finally, the selected vendor had to be responsive with in-house technical expertise.

After evaluating six packages, The Athlete's Foot selected RTC Group's "HTP-Link Polling Package." "RTC had 97% of what we were looking for off the shelf," Hays said. "I was also impressed by RTC's technical expertise and "can do" attitude. They assigned two of their analysts to us full time until the other 3% was done including E-Mail, screen changes and faster hang up times. The job was completed within several days."

During an initial pilot period, The Athlete's Foot subjected HTP-LINK to rigorous testing. Working closely together, the staffs of the Athlete's Foot and RTC fine-tuned the product. After the pilot, confidence in HTP-Link was so high that the Athlete's Foot committed to an aggressive roll-out schedule. The AS/400 with HTP-LINK replaced PC-based polling to all 250+ stores within ten weeks.

Since RTC provides source code, The Athlete's Foot has the option to do their own future modifications. The Athlete's Foot has elected to utilize a RTC maintenance contract. This allows them to take advantage of RTC's 24-hour, 7-days/week, 365 days/year customer support, as well as receiving new software releases.

"We're very satisfied with RTC and HTP-LINK," Hays said. "They have technical expertise that spans from POS to mainframe, an aggressive approach to problem solving, and a driving philosophy of establishing long term business partnerships. We view them as playing an integral part in our future strategy."

RTC Group is an IBM Authorized Application Specialist.