



Data Management

BY SEAN CARROLL APRIL 3, 2001

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From customer information to the back-office data collected in ERP and CRM applications, being able to answer the larger questions-which region is growing in value, which is slumping, what sorts of people are buying what products, which products are tanking, which regions might have more business and therefore require more staff and attention in the coming year-can give a company a running start over the competition. Without other options, small to midsize businesses have traditionally tried to manage their own data. But keeping track of all that information in-house requires the skillful (and expensive) services of a database administrator to build and maintain the vast and analytically flexible databases.

That's where ASP data warehousing comes in. With the ASP model, small businesses get the sort of analysis previously available only to large corporations. When using a data center ASP, small businesses get the advantage of access to a database architect to create custom queries that are specific to a company's needs. A medical office, for example, might ask an ASP to create a database query to search records of patients from a certain ZIP code who have visited a given hospital in the past six months.

Leading Data Management ASPs

Breakaway Solutions
www.breakaway.com
Cognos
www.cognos.com
Exenet
www.exenet.com
Great Plains
www.greatplains.com
HostPro
www.hostpro.com
ManagedOps.com
www.managedops.com
StorageNetworks
www.storagenetworks.com

Web Site Analysis

Accrue Hit List
www.accrue.com
digiMine
www.digimine.com
NetGenesis
www.netgen.com

What Data Management ASPs Offer

For start-ups and other small businesses, where there is virtually no old data

storage system to be concerned about, low-end data management ASPs like Exenet (www.exenet.com), HostPro (www.hostpro.com), ManagedOps.com, and StorageNetworks (www.storagenetworks.com) are the best option. These ASPs simply take all the warehoused data a company has and store it on their own servers in a format that has been chosen by the subscriber.

Based on this, the ASP writes programs that, for instance, search for customers by ZIP code or products by price. Because this approach is scalable and doesn't require in-house development, additional data-mining analysis programs can be added easily and inexpensively.

More established companies, and those with functioning, elaborate data management systems in place, are better candidates for higher-end data management ASPs like Breakaway Solutions (www.breakaway.com), Cognos (www.cognos.com), and Great Plains (www.greatplains.com).

Although the initial outlay may be considerably higher—as much as 50 percent more than with the lower-end group—these ASPs, with more manpower, servers, and hosting locations, can match a customer's existing database implementation and applications. In a typical implementation that we looked at, Cognos created expansive data marts that incorporated the information from a company's ERP programs, databases, and even simple "flat files" (such as traditional spreadsheets) and then performed complex business intelligence analysis on them.

For many companies, internal databases are only half of the story—if that. Also essential is so-called clickstream analysis of their Web sites. This involves tracking the behavior of visitors to a Web site, examining what they do there, recording where they're geographically located, keeping track of who referred them to the Web site, and noting which pages resulted in the greatest number of further requests, as well as what sorts of visitors were most likely to request further information.

Database management ASPs that are particularly strong in providing clickstream analysis include Accrue Hit List (www.accrue.com), digiMine (www.digimine.com), and NetGenesis (www.netgen.com).

Data Management ASP Tip

The key factor to consider when choosing an ASP for data warehousing is the extent of breakage—the amount of disruption caused by the move—the business will experience. A company that already has considerable internal data-crunching procedures in place will find that it's worth paying a bit more for a solution that is as close as possible to the existing system.

Companies that have no systems in place, or those whose internal systems aren't working right, might be able to choose a cheaper solution offering less customization, saving money and incurring no additional breakage.
