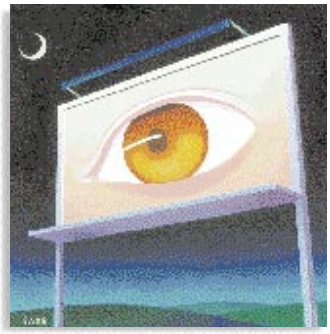
Helping MIS Manage Data Growth



VARs can help MIS departments handle expanding new kinds of data when they can't divert in-house expertise and resources.

Data growth is not only vertical, it is horizontal as well. Today's MIS manager must be prepared to deal with both kinds. By *vertical* data growth, I mean growth in the data that is central to an organization's core competencies. This data typically relates to financial, manufacturing, sales and marketing, and other business operations critical to success in the marketplace. Vertical growth is obvious, because it is growth in existing data and strains existing systems; but it is not the only data growth challenge confronting today's enterprises.

Businesses are now scrutinizing every aspect of their operations to ensure optimal operating efficiencies. As a consequence, MIS managers are being asked to implement all sorts of specialized systems to create and manage the kinds of data not currently supported by existing systems. This appearance of new classes of data alongside the growth in existing classes of data I refer to as *horizontal* data growth.

This type of growth creates unusual, difficult challenges for MIS departments. First, they must meet the challenge of providing their organizations with the means to productively handle new and substantial kinds of data. Second, MIS managers must do this without investing in in-house expertise and resources not critical to their organizations' strategic objectives. They will find that VARs are good resources for this often contradictory mission.

Let's look at a couple of examples in which VARs can help meet the horizontal data growth challenges common to many organizations.

Facilities Management

Every organization has facilities that constantly change. New facilities are added, old facilities are dropped and existing facilities are reconfigured. On one hand, businesses must execute facility changes to remain flexible in the face of changing business conditions. On the other, it is critical that these changes be executed with a minimum of cost and disruption. Many organizations turn to facility management (FM) systems to meet this challenge.

A VAR specializing in this area can be invaluable to the MIS department chartered with establishing an FM capability. FM systems typically combine a specialized computer-aided design (CAD) capability with an integrated database management capability. The designer must answer some key questions in advance. Does the system need to support simple floor plans, or will 3-D modeling and visualization be required? Must it handle the placement of utilities such as power and HVAC? How will the FM system tie to existing asset management systems and data? An experienced FM VAR can help answer these questions and propose the appropriate hardware and software to meet the requirements. The VAR also may be able to handle outsourcing of the entire FM operation or portions of it.

Implementing an FM system requires a significant data-entry effort. Existing floor plans have to be digitized and loaded into databases. Data integrity must be ensured, because *as designed* is rarely the same as *as built* or *as modified*. Most FM VARs are prepared to execute this initial data-entry operation. As FM data can be substantial, MIS managers have to decide where to store it. Good networked, multiuser version control capabilities in many FM software packages open the option of keeping the data offsite but online. VARs can be a useful resource for this task, too.

Media Asset Management

A second, different area of business also presents opportunity for the qualified VAR. One of the most explosive areas of data growth is in nonalphanumeric data formats. These formats can be more difficult and costly to create, store, transport and manipulate than traditional data elements. Data assets containing still images, motion images and/or sound formats generally are called *media assets* and are present in many applications within an organization.

They may include online or archived digital copies of paper records, training materials, supporting documentation such as insurance claim photographs, visual records of corporate assets such as capital equipment, and many other types of media data. MIS managers will again find specialized VARs to be a significant resource to call upon to manage the growth of media assets.

The state of the art for media asset management applications varies widely. Some applications, like business records management, are fairly mature and well supported by the VAR community. Others,

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like the on-demand playback of television-quality video from media servers, are just emerging and are largely the province of enterprises like broadcasters, for whom this is a mission-critical application.

When a media asset management application is mature, specialized VARs can be of tremendous support to an MIS department. They can help MIS sort through the various media capture options, the competing media data formats, tricky issues like media data compression, and the many storage and display options. MIS managers should look for experienced VARs versed in modern MIS disciplines and technologies, as well as in those related to media assets. Attacking the problem of corporate media asset management from either a purely traditional MIS perspective or a purely multimedia perspective is a recipe for failure.

These two examples—facilities management and media asset management—are different in detail but similar in the ways they present MIS departments with data growth challenges. First, they offer opportunities for enterprises to strengthen their operating efficiency and effectiveness, but they usually are not considered strategic opportunities. Second, they present challenges that most MIS departments are not well-positioned to handle in-house and for which it may not be appropriate to maintain staff to do so. Third, they represent natural opportunities for MIS departments to turn to outside help. VARs can leverage across multiple clients the specialized expertise and resources inappropriate to a single MIS department.

In these ways, the data growth crunch clearly leads to the growth of the partnership between MIS and VAR. IT

Matthew Peterson *is president of Scenic Wonders in Madison, WI, which provides visual products and services for information highways. He can be reached at 74123.3210@compuserve.com.*