HITCHCOCK AUTOMOTIVE DRIVES TO SUCCESS WITH CISCO CHANNEL PARTNER PRAXIS COMPUTING

Hitchcock Automotive operates five automobile dealerships throughout Los Angeles and Orange Counties. Its franchises include BMW, Toyota, Ford, Volkswagen, and Hyundai.

Hitchcock Automotive enlisted Cisco® Premier Partner Praxis Computing to design and deploy a wide area network (WAN) between its dealerships, as well as set up a wireless Internet service for each of the customer waiting areas. The WAN implementation provides a fast, reliable, and centralized computer system for the dealerships, improving communications and efficiency, and customers waiting for service on their cars can now access the Internet or their emails via a wireless Internet Café.

THE 'AUTOMATIC' BUSINESS REQUIREMENTS

Sales, service, and parts operations at modern automotive dealerships are automated to the point that the dealership cannot function manually. Hitchcock relied on a local mid-range server for operations at each of its dealerships, but they investigated centralizing the computer system at the corporate office using high-performance PC servers. This centralization would significantly reduce the administrative work required at each location, reduce administrative staff, and enable consolidated management reports to be generated more easily.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Vertical Market/Technology
Retail Auto Sales/Security, Wireless

Partner Business Focus
Praxis Computing is a Cisco Premier Partner that has built a strong business by developing a vertical focus on the networking needs of small and medium-sized businesses in the automotive, entertainment, legal, and real estate fields in around and Los Angeles. In its 11 years of technology consulting, Praxis has gained a reputation for consistent technical excellence and has earned specializations from Cisco in both VPN/Security and Wireless technology.

Customer
Hitchcock Automotive operates five automobile dealerships throughout Los Angeles and Orange Counties. Each

of its dealerships used to run on a local mid-range server, but the company wanted to centralize the computer system at the corporate office using high performance PC servers. This would reduce administrative work and staff at each location, allow easier generation of consolidated management reports, and provide a faster, and more stable and reliable network for each of the dealerships.

Business Challenge
Each dealership must maintain connectivity to the automotive manufacturer's corporate facility through a unique variety of equipment and software. Network requirements for each element of the system had to be established through IT contacts at each manufacturer. Additionally, automobile dealerships are highly automated, so the network had to be exceedingly reliable. Any outage results in stalling of sales and

customer service and hundreds of employees standing idle. Hitchcock Automotive also wanted to provide wireless Internet service to its customers waiting in the service area lounges.

Technology Solution/ROI
Praxis Computing designed and deployed a WAN connecting multiple automobile dealerships using T1, ISDN and VPN technologies. The also installed wireless Internet Cafes using Cisco Aironet-based wireless Internet service for use by customers waiting in the service area lounges. The new network saves each dealership manager 10 hours per week in network administration and monthly maintenance tasks are handled centrally. Hitchcock Automotive has done away with duplicate personnel and equipment at each dealership.

A crucial component to success, however, would be the deployment of a stable Wide Area Network (WAN). Rich Morris, Hitchcock's VP of Information Systems notes, "When I was considering running two of our largest stores over a WAN, a big concern was insuring that links between the stores and the central server would be fast and exceedingly reliable. Any network outage meant hundreds of employees standing idle, and lost sales revenue. Downtime during a weekend promotion would be catastrophic."

SELECTING A PARTNER

Morris envisioned a robust computer network to provide uninterrupted high-performance service. "The success of this project depended upon building the network from best-of-class components," says Morris. "In my mind that meant Cisco hardware and Cisco certified engineers." At initial meetings, vendors were proposing solutions that did not meet his stringent requirements. "Most firms we talked to suggested 'boiler plate' solutions — they all wanted to sell me on their current promotion. I was told that the performance and stability I wanted wasn't technically feasible," he says.

Morris then turned to the "Partner Locator" on www.cisco.com, to look for Cisco network specialists, and found Praxis Computing, a Cisco Premier Partner headquartered in Los Angeles.

"From our initial meeting, it was clear to me that working with Praxis would be different," Morris recalls. "They listened to my needs and presented multiple solutions, explaining the benefits and drawbacks of each. Praxis provided the technical and business answers tailored to my specific concerns and questions. I was very comfortable with their knowledge base. But what impressed me most was that Praxis had references that actually chased me down so they could tell me how pleased they were with the success of their network projects."

DESIGNING THE NETWORK

Success with previous WAN projects contributed to Praxis Computing's ability to efficiently design and deploy a solution for Hitchcock Automotive. However, the Praxis design for Hitchcock represented a unique combination of products precisely configured to meet Hitchcock's stringent performance, reliability, and security requirements.

During the design, Praxis worked closely with Cisco field engineers to review network design scenarios. Jeff Roback, president of Praxis Computing, worked with his dedicated team to design a WAN connecting Hitchcock's various dealerships using T1, ISDN, and VPN technologies. Built to take full advantage of the advanced capabilities that Cisco equipment delivers, the network was also designed to ensure Morris' requirements for availability, performance and security were met at all points throughout the network.

THE PARTNERSHIP

Although computer networks are mission-critical components of small and medium-sized businesses, Praxis Computing understands that many companies do not have full-time network engineering personnel on-staff. "Our in-depth understanding of networking technology is a tremendous asset to our clients' in-house IT departments during the design and deployment phases of networking projects," says Roback.

Rich Morris provided the design and security criteria for the project, and Praxis provided the design, installation, and configuration of all WAN equipment. As a Cisco certified channel partner Praxis was able to use the Cisco 'New Accounts' program, enabling Morris to procure the best possible equipment while staying within his budget.

"MANAGERS CAN FOCUS ON RUNNING THEIR DEPARTMENTS INSTEAD OF KEEPING THE COMPUTER SYSTEM UP AND RUNNING."

For ongoing support and maintenance of the network, Hitchcock depends upon both Praxis and Cisco. Morris turns to Praxis for network expansion. For ongoing post-sales support Praxis offered Hitchcock a Cisco SMARTnet® services contract, providing Hitchcock with post-sales network support services 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

PROJECT CHALLENGES

As with any major deployment, the Hitchcock Automotive WAN project was not without its challenges.

"Deploying a wide area network among multiple dealerships of different franchises presented unique challenges," says Morris. "Each dealership requires connectivity to the automotive manufacturer's corporate facility through a variety of equipment and software. Praxis worked efficiently with our IT contacts at each manufacturer, establishing the network requirements for each element of our system. Praxis also created a network plan to maintain connectivity to each manufacturer through our network without compromising our security." Praxis utilized the advanced security features integrated through the Cisco product line to provide the additional layers of security, isolating the manufacturer's traffic from internal operations.

Praxis overcame other obstacles during the network deployment.

"When we were ready to bring one of our dealerships on-line, we discovered that the in-house cabling at that location was not reliable enough to create a stable local area network," says Morris. "Praxis showed us how to utilize Cisco wireless equipment to overcome the cabling obstacles and also provide the benefits of mobility to managers in this facility."

NEW WAN ACCELERATES BUSINESS

Since implementation in January 2003, the network has performed flawlessly. Morris notes the remote site systems run as fast as those at the central site, with zero downtime. And the individual dealerships are enjoying the benefits of the new system too. Removing the remote servers saves the manager of each dealership 10 hours a week on network administration. Monthly maintenance tasks can be performed at the corporate office, and deployment of new applications is much simpler. There is no longer need for duplication of personnel or equipment at each dealership.

Hitchcock can now efficiently generate management reports for multiple dealerships and distribute them to executives through the new internal Web site, regardless of the physical location of the dealerships or executive. "Managers can focus on running their departments instead of keeping the computer system up and running," says Morris. And he reports that customers in the service area lounges appreciate the wireless Internet links.

The network has exceeded Morris' expectations and Roback declared it among his firm's favorite designs in their 11 years of network deployment. Morris notes, "The ability to run our stores on a central server with this level of reliability is priceless."

SUCCESS IN THE SMB MARKETPLACE

Due to Praxis Computing's understanding of small and medium sized business and their growing expertise in the auto dealership business, Hitchcock Automotive has engaged them in several new networking projects including re-designing the LAN infrastructure at other dealerships.

"We pride ourselves on providing our customers high performance, high security networks, and Cisco networking equipment is the natural platform in this arena," said Roback. "Our partnership with Cisco is very important to us in our continued success in the small and medium-sized business marketplace."

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