

LANSA Case Study

GF Inc wraps up customer service with LANSA

GF Inc is the leading supplier of industrial packaging and fastening products in Western Canada through its GF Packaging and GF Fastening divisions. GF improved customer service and reduced call center traffic with an online eCatalogue site built with LANSA Commerce Edition in only four weeks. A Visual LANSA-based contact management system, called 'Business Builder', lets staff handle more accounts and produce consistent, attractive quotations. Both solutions integrate with a COBOL and IBM i-based ERP system.

Jim O'Reilly, president of GF Inc, says "We rolled the eCatalogue site out to the first users in the fifth week. Within three months, our 300 largest customers signed up, leading to immediate relief in our call center. Customers are buying more products as they can see the complete breadth of product assortment."



The Challenge of Integration

About 70 percent of General Fastener's revenue comes from packaging supplies and 30 percent from fastening and flooring supplies. Most of the packaging supplies are sold to manufacturers.

"We have a sales force of over 60 people visiting the purchasing officers of companies throughout the west," explains O'Reilly. Customers placed orders by phone or fax requiring manual entry in our distribution system. Our call center also received a lot of calls concerning order and account status."

"We realized several years ago that a Web site was a first step in improving customer service."

"First, we built a Web site with Visual Basic and Active Server pages, but the site was unstable. Because our ERP system runs on IBM i, we had a lot of issues duplicating the data and keeping the two systems synchronized. The solution was awkward and we never rolled it out to our customers."

"Next, we investigated IBM's WebSphere. But learning WebSphere and Java was difficult and the expertise required did not relate to our existing skill set. It was not productive and I would have had to double my staff to manage and run that type of installation."

"Customers see the complete product assortment and buy more products."

"We also wanted to provide our staff with a Windows solution that could integrate both with our IBM i based ERP system and with MS Office."

"So, when we learned that we could use Visual LANSA to develop both Web and Windows solutions, we were really interested and decided to try it out," says O'Reilly.

Web Self-Service for Customers

GF purchased LANSA Commerce Edition and one month of LANSA consulting services. Most standard functionality was implemented, including placing and tracing of orders and stock inquiry. Customers can see their invoices, outstanding orders and statement balances and define multiple levels of security for their own staff.

"We were able to get a first cut of the eCatalogue site up and running in three weeks," says O'Reilly. "All we had to do on our end was develop a few small COBOL programs to interface with the Commerce Edition suite."

LANSA consulting staff mapped our core solution to Commerce Edition. It worked well. In the fifth week, we rolled the site out to the first few users. We sell over



20,000 products and spent far more time on cleaning data and making product photos, than with programming.”

O'Reilly continues, “After one week of mentoring, we were able to support and enhance the eCatalogue ourselves. We learned how the solution worked and best practice LANSA coding. It gave an enormous boost in our understanding and productivity.”

Charlie Roth, systems analyst at GF, comments, “Maintenance is easy. Recently we redesigned the entire look and feel of the site. We took less than a week to update and implement the new site, which included adding many new navigational features.”

“Within three months of implementation our 300 largest customers signed-up, leading to immediate relief in our call center. Eventually we expect that most of our 6,000 active customers will make the site their preferred way of placing orders.”

“We already noticed a 30 percent decrease in inquiry calls. We have 20 people in our call centers across the country, who are now looking forward to providing real customer service instead of answering standard queries.”

“Customers are buying more products, because they can see the complete breadth of our product assortment. You can search by product group, brand and so on. Even our own staff has developed a better understanding of the product, because of the easy navigation and attractive graphical presentation.”

Windows Integration for Staff

Using Visual LANSA, GF developed a Windows-based contact management system, called Business Builder, that allows sales staff to manage their accounts. Business Builder is integrated with the IBM i-based core line of business and uses the same COBOL custom price calculation modules to generate quotations directly into MS Word and MS Excel.

O'Reilly says, “We get more quotes out and of a higher professional level than we ever could before. We create a much better image for our customers. And because the sales staff are more productive, we can handle more accounts per person.”

“Sales staff used to prepare their quotations using a variety of tools, which would vary in style and accuracy depending on the person. They had to retype product and price information, or copy iSeries reports to the customer. The process was time-consuming and error prone.”

“Over the years we built several front-end Windows solutions, but the performance and ease of use just didn't cut it. Visual LANSA's performance is great. There are no real limitations once you understand how to use the product. It is as fully functional a tool as you are going to get.”

Company and System Information

- GF Packaging supplies industrial packaging, equipment and warehouse supplies. GF Fastening supplies tools, fasteners and accessories to contractors and industry. GF has 13 store locations in Alberta, British Columbia and Saskatchewan. For more information visit: www.gf.ca
- GF uses an in-house developed COBOL ERP system, extended and modernized with LANSA, on the IBM i operation system.

“You can do anything you can do in C++. LANSA is very productive and projects move ahead really quickly.”

“A single LANSA skill set lets three developers share Web and Windows development.”

GF also uses Visual LANSA to help produce their printed catalogue. A Visual LANSA program extracts the data and images from the IBM i, in a similar format to the Web site, and feeds this to Quark desktop publishing software.

“We generate 80 percent of the catalog pages automatically. Previously it took one person a full year to create the catalog, so we would produce it only every three to four years. The new catalog is of much higher quality, includes pricing and our full product range. And we can produce it in less than three months.

“To me this is a spin-off of building the eCatalogue and it shows the benefit of LANSA's integrated products and single skill set.”

The Benefits of Reuse

“The three things that impress me most about LANSA are its speed of getting to the data, its easy maintenance and good support,” concludes Roth.

“LANSA's Web and Windows environments both have fast native DB2/400 data access. Central definition of components makes maintenance easy. And whenever we had an issue, we felt a real commitment from LANSA to get it solved.”

“A single LANSA skill set lets us share Web and Windows development between three developers. And we find LANSA far more productive than COBOL, even though we have been using LANSA for only one year and COBOL for more than 15,” says O'Reilly.

“We have a lot of complex routines for pricing and order processing, already written and tested, in our core COBOL system. We can call these COBOL routines from LANSA, allowing us to continue to benefit from our existing investment.”

“The most important lesson we have learned is to invest in LANSA training to get your head around the proper way of development,” concludes O'Reilly.

“The more components and definitions you put in LANSA's Repository, the more reuse benefit you get. With each subsequent project, the focus is shifting more towards assembly of available and tested components.”