

Verastream Host Integrator helps BT Retail take customer service to an even higher level

Integrating front- and back-end systems is the key



BT Retail is the largest provider of communications services to residential and business markets in the United Kingdom. For 21 million customers, BT Retail delivers voice, data, Internet, and multimedia solutions as well as managed and packaged communications solutions. It is the prime market channel for the other businesses in the British Telecom Group and employs a workforce of about 47,000.

Customer service and cost reduction are the driving forces behind every IT decision at BT Retail. With the help of Attachmate® Verastream® Host Integrator, the Business Advance division of BT Retail rolled out some tactical “quick-win” solutions that fulfill the company guidelines.

The IT Landscape at BT Retail

David Rushton, the organization’s technical design authority for tactical systems, knew that he had to find a way to break down the functional barriers between BT’s business processes. First, he needed to unlock selected host functionality so it could be combined with different logic and used in other applications such as their Siebel front end, where orders are taken and stored.

BT Retail’s hosts include a mixture of UNIX, HP, and IBM mainframe systems. Because he had to quickly deliver results and tightly control maintenance overhead, Rushton began to have doubts about his existing host-integration software. “To model screens using that product, our developers had to manually point at the screen to count the characters, rows, and columns,” he said. “They’d be searching for entry or data fields, literally by hand.”

The Verastream Difference

After a half-day product demonstration with Attachmate, Rushton reported, “I immediately appreciated how easy it is to use Verastream modeling. Just clicking a mouse to select an area of the screen and generate a pattern that uniquely identifies the screen: that’s a big step forward.”

QUICK VIEW

Problem

- Needed to improve service and reduce costs by integrating front-end apps with UNIX, HP, and IBM mainframe systems.

Solution

- Used Verastream Host Integrator for a non-invasive link between front-end apps (including Siebel) and legacy hosts.

Results

- Enhanced customer satisfaction.
- Reduced costs with better internal efficiencies.
- A rapid-development platform in place for ongoing projects.

During the Verastream Host Integrator modeling process, host-application experts can define tables by creating a list of database columns that name the data elements. Within the tables, procedures map data inputs and outputs from host screens, intelligently navigating applications and remembering the navigation for future use. Procedures (including *select*, *update*, *insert*, and *delete*) can be combined to perform a complex series of transactions.

Using the Verastream Table Interface at BT: As Easy as SQL

Rushton’s requirement to build distributed applications meant that sending data in piecemeal fashion (i.e., using traditional integration tools) was not an option. “Every call to a host system has an impact, so we needed to get as much information back as we could, in one go,” he said.

He and his IT staff used Verastream’s table interface to map host screens and parse large quantities of data in one record set. The ActiveX Data Object model in Visual Basic (BT’s existing programming language) maps directly to the table object in Verastream. Now they can use SQL commands to retrieve a variety of host-based information whenever it’s needed.

Without Verastream’s table layer and procedures, Rushton’s team would have had to manipulate the data as something more basic,

such as an array, and then populate the record set. Instead, they were able to query the host information as if it were a database.

Host Interactions, Without Traffic Jams

For many of today's customer contact centers, the inability to integrate with back-end systems is their biggest hurdle. A common IT response is to write a client application that will interact directly with the host applications. The problem is that a full network round trip is required for each interaction. The results:

- Enterprise traffic is increased.
- System performance bogs down.
- Reps can't keep up with demands.

A better approach is to write client applications to take advantage of Verastream tables and procedures, letting transaction processing shift to the Verastream middle-tier server. One SQL command from the tables and procedures application code requires communication only between the client application and the Verastream server. The balance of the transaction processing takes place between server and host application. The results:

- Enterprise traffic is reduced.
- System performance is optimized.
- Reps can handle more calls.

Facilitating Diagnostic Reporting With Verastream

At BT Retail, reported product failures can be costly because they generate a lot of internal activity such as phone-call cycles or dispatches of people and vans. Although BT Retail has good diagnostic tools to track down and analyze product failures, the testing programs reside on a mixture of host systems. That was making it difficult to get a clear picture of a given product's behavior, according to Rushton.

Using Verastream Host Integrator, Rushton's IT team was able to integrate various diagnostics that perform online testing, and then present the results in the front-end application. Because BT's testing systems are accessed through a combination of IBM 3270, HP, and VT emulation, Rushton said that he was particularly impressed with Verastream Host Integrator's ability to integrate the company's tough character-based applications as easily as

the block-mode applications. "Those VT-emulated systems are always the hardest to work with, but Verastream handled them quite well," he said.

Expediting Delivery With Verastream

Another BT Retail project actually called for communication to go in the opposite direction. Instead of taking information from host to front end, this project needed to take information from front end to host. BT Retail was exchanging too many follow-up phone calls with customers to clarify details about the orders they had placed. (e.g. "Was it the red phone you wanted, or the blue?") So the goal of this project was to remove some of the manual order entry and at the same time improve the quality of the data going to the back end.

Rushton reported that BT Retail's delivery applications reside on one mainframe, while billing and maintenance applications reside on another mainframe. Orders for products and services are captured at the front end with Siebel. Using Verastream Host Integrator, all the order information, with logic, was made available to the back-end systems. The process was non-invasive to BT Retail's existing business processes.

Implementing business rules at the front end, "smartening up" key data, and transferring it to the correct place on the back end have eliminated unnecessary follow-up calls to the customer, according to Rushton. "By using Verastream, we've removed manual procedures and the whole delivery process has been accelerated," he said.

"Verastream services are being used in about 90 percent of the tactical projects we've delivered in the past year."

— David Rushton
Technical design authority
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