

PROMUS COMPANIES INC.

Through a new Microsoft® Windows™-based application, Promus Companies Inc. maintains the highest standards of quality at its Embassy Suites hotels while helping management and staff concentrate on service.

In the hotel business, customer service is everything, a policy well understood by the management of the Promus Companies. Based in Memphis, Tennessee, Promus owns, operates, and licenses the award-winning 103-hotel Embassy Suites chain along with 350 other hotels and six gaming casinos—including Harrah's Casinos and Hampton Inns—and generates annual revenues of \$1.1 billion. Indeed, making customer service foremost is a policy that must be well understood by any player in the highly competitive hospitality industry, says Promus Director of Communications Ralph Berry: "Fancy decor and trees in the lobby mean nothing unless employees are free to focus their energies on providing outstanding service to guests."

At Embassy Suites, Berry explains, the best way to ensure first-rate customer service is to give management and staff fast and easy access to the management-quality information they need—from the maintenance status of heating and electrical systems to the availability of clean linen to trends in customer requests. In total, close to 500 Embassy Suites staff members rely on such information to do their jobs.

Information Processing: The Problems of Paper

In 1992 Promus began introducing a paper-based method to various Embassy Suites properties for gathering and analyzing quality-management information. But even as the new method eliminated some problems, it generated others, explains Hotel Systems Lead Programmer Analyst Lane Sorgen. "We knew we would eventually want the information available in a form that upper management could access via their computer workstations," he says. "But collecting and reporting the information for that purpose turned into a huge job—one we ended up paying outside contractors to do."

Around the same time the paper-based quality-management method was being introduced, Promus began piloting a new corporate-wide information network. Designed as a platform for a suite of Windows-based applications, the network was initially implemented at company headquarters and comprised a Microsoft LAN Manager-based server machine and some 600 client machines running Windows™ and Windows for Workgroups™.

The Ideal Migration Path to a Windows Solution

Between the need to move the paper-based data into a computer-based format, the new network, and development tools such as the Microsoft Access® database, Promus saw a match.

"All our research was telling us that using the Windows operating system as a platform and Microsoft Access as a development tool would be an ideal way of migrating from our paper-based quality-management approach to a Windows-based application, we could easily design and tailor to our business needs," says Sorgen. So in late 1992 Sorgen, as project leader, teamed up with Denton Poynter, a programmer from the Memphis-based consulting firm Delta Software Systems, to design and develop a new quality-management application.

As a critical part of prototype development, says Sorgen, he and Poynter gathered input on front-end design from would-be users at various hotels. "Using Microsoft Access in its development mode, we implemented users' requests right before their eyes," he explains. "Doing this helped us avoid the red tape of formal change requests, budget requests and approvals, and follow-up phone calls and visits, saving us close to four weeks in development time." This approach also helped Sorgen and Poynter produce a beta release in less than three months.

Microsoft Access proved itself in other ways as well, says Decision Support Systems Manager Corinne Chaves, who drove the selection of the product for the project. "Because of its ties into ODBC, using Microsoft Access for development means we can connect the application with other applications in the future," she explains.

More Quality in Less Time

In early 1993, the management-quality application was installed on Windows for Workgroups-based workstations at a handful of Embassy Suites sites. Essentially, it tracks information on equipment, supplies, repair and maintenance activity, and any other data vital to maintaining quality standards for hotel guests—all through a common Microsoft Access front end providing users graphical one-step access to the database.

According to Sorgen, the application quickly began generating concrete benefits. "For the first time ever, hotel management can easily monitor employee performance and troubleshoot problems with equipment or supplies," he says. "They not only can know what's in need of fixing, they also can keep track of what's being done right."

The application is also saving the costs formerly incurred by using outside contractors for data collection and reporting, as well as cutting significant costs in hotel-management time. "After the application was installed for less than a month, we halved the time that managers at the affected properties were spending on paperwork," says Sorgen. "Once it's in place at all the Embassy Suites properties, we expect it to save us more than 1200 person-hours per week."

A Robust Platform for Growth

To provide regional management a clearer picture of quality management at various properties, Promus plans to incorporate the

workstations running the quality-management application into the corporate-wide LAN Manager-based network first introduced at headquarters in 1992. By late 1993, that network is expected to expand far beyond headquarters, connecting over a Microsoft TCP/IP-based wide area network with Windows for Workgroups-based machines at regional offices and hotel properties.

As Chaves sees it, Windows for Workgroups makes an ideal platform for the quality-management application. Since through its support for peer-to-peer networking it ensures that users are always accessing an up-to-date database. "Using Windows for Workgroups means a manager could be checking something on the quality-management application while at the same time accessing a reservation system for a prospective hotel guest," she explains. "The bottom line is that the guest gets a faster response to his or her request."

LAN Manager, which Promus adopted in place of an earlier NetWare® system, provides benefits of its own to Promus and its properties. Especially important, says Chaves, is what LAN Manager is expected to do in light of the firm's future development plans. "We selected LAN Manager over NetWare for two primary reasons: scale and robustness—in short, because it delivers a better platform for growth." Support for growth is crucial, she adds, since over the next two and a half years Promus plans to connect up to 3000 machines to the corporate-wide network.

Already supporting an Executive Information System, the network is targeted to run a collection of other applications as well. Now under development, they are expected to simplify the new-hire process, streamline job-performance tracking, and expedite payroll.

In time Promus also plans to roll out new, enterprise-wide operational systems based on the Microsoft TCP/IP wide area network, incorporating some 1500 client workstations accessing an SCO UNIX® server at each Embassy Suites property and a System V.4 UNIX superminicomputer at headquarters. The systems will be accessible to the LAN Manager network through the same workstations running the quality-management application, says Chaves. "This approach supports our overall strategy of providing access to all systems from any workstation."

As Chaves goes on to explain, Promus is also considering migrating some of the UNIX servers to run on the Windows NT™ operating system, which the organization began testing in October 1992. "We want flexibility in our future hardware choices," she says, "and we believe the scalable nature of Windows NT can give us that flexibility."

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Solution Summary

Industry

Hospitality

Business Solution

Hotel Management-Quality Information System

Architecture

Microsoft Access DBMS running on Windows for Workgroups-based desktops (present)

Microsoft Access DBMS running on Windows for Workgroups-based desktops and exchanging data with LAN Manager for Windows-based wide area network (future)

Products Used

Microsoft Access

Microsoft Mail

Microsoft Schedule+

Microsoft TCP/IP

Microsoft Visual Basic™

Microsoft Windows

Microsoft Windows for Workgroups

MS-DOS®

SCO UNIX

System V.4 UNIX

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Development Resources

One internal developer (Hotel Systems Lead Programmer Analyst Lane Sorgen) and one external consultant (Denton Poynter, a programmer from Memphis-based Delta Software Systems)

Development Time

To beta release: 75 days

Benefits

Halves the time spent at selected hotel properties on quality-management information gathering and processing (beta)

Is expected to save 1200 hotel-management person-hours per week at a total of 54 properties (projected)