



## Microsoft .NET Framework Helps Restaurant-Review Leader to Cut Development Time in Half

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***Using SOAP, Microsoft Visual Basic .NET, and the Microsoft .NET Framework, Zagat Survey is building tools for expediting development, simplifying database upgrades, and streamlining solution maintenance. Once completed, these tools are expected to provide Zagat with stronger partnerships, greater revenue opportunity, and a dramatically more efficient way of handling the collection, management, and production of content.***

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### **Situation**

For more than two decades, the people at Zagat Survey have worked hard to maintain their company's reputation as the most trusted name in restaurant reviewing. Today, they're reinforcing and expanding that reputation through two major technology initiatives underway with the help of SOAP and the Microsoft .NET Framework technologies, including Visual Basic .NET: (1) a Web-based administrative toolset designed to expedite user-polling updates, simplify database maintenance, and strengthen XML-based co-branding efforts and (2) a content-management system designed to streamline virtually every line-of-business activity in the company.

To launch the initiatives, CTO Stephen Forte and his colleagues evaluated various technologies designed to help Zagat interface directly with its partners. "We wanted a technology that would work not just for one or two existing partners but for all of them—and for any future partnerships we might want to pursue," Forte says. But the evaluators found that most technologies would have required them to write custom code to accommodate the diverse operating systems that different partners might be using. Then they looked into SOAP, the Microsoft .NET Framework, and Visual Basic .NET. "We saw from the outset that these technologies were different, that they could help us to interface smoothly with any partner's system no matter what its foundation."

### **Solution**

Today, half of Zagat's eight development professionals are working on the initiatives with an eye toward production release of the toolset starting in June 2001 and the content-management system later in the year. With the toolset, Zagat will have a powerful and versatile way to update databases at company headquarters in New York and at a remote server site in North Carolina. "Before, we had to communicate through a firewall to do this, but with this toolset, we—or one of

### Solution Overview

#### **Customer Profile**

Founded in 1979, 110+ employees, over 150,000 users, famous for restaurant reviews.

#### **Business Situation**

Needed a more efficient way to update and maintain databases, pursue co-branding efforts with partners, and implement data collection, management, and publication.

#### **Solution Benefits**

Development proceeding twice as fast as before, simplified updating and maintenance of databases, expanded revenue and partnership opportunities, deployment of technical personnel to more lucrative assignments.

#### **Software and Services**

Microsoft Windows® 2000 Advanced Server including Internet Information Services 5.0 Microsoft SQL Server™ 2000 Microsoft Visual Basic .NET SOAP (Simple Object Access Protocol)

#### **Hardware**

A Web farm of eight Dell PowerEdge servers, each with quad Pentium III Xeon 600 MHz processors and 1-GB RAM. Two clustered database servers, also Dell PowerEdge and each with quad Pentium III Xeon 600 MHz processors and 1-GB RAM. Total data volume 1 GB.

#### **Scenario**

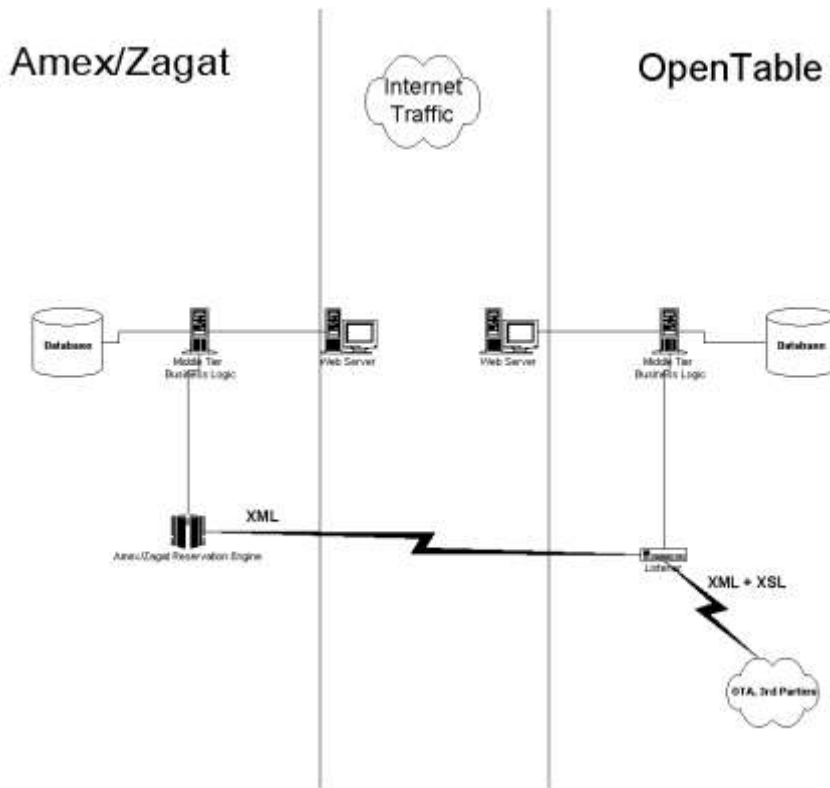
Web services

our partners, as the case might be—will simply send an XML package request and SOAP will execute the request,” Forte says.

As for the content-management system, it will rely on a Visual Basic .NET-based front end and a SQL Server 2000-based back end to process data on all the properties Zagat covers and make it available for the surveys that Zagat offers to users on its Web site. Once users submit their input, the system will load it into the SQL Server 2000 database and run Visual Basic .NET-based utilities to make it available to the Zagat editorial group. There, writers and editors will build reviews and, with the help of those same Visual Basic .NET utilities, export the content of those reviews to an XML format destined either for the Web site or for conversion into Adobe FrameMaker files for later publication in book form.

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Stephen Forte  
 CTO  
 Zagat Survey



**Figure 1** The Zagat SOAP toolset as implemented in a solution for two Zagat partners: American Express and OpenTable

**Benefits**

***Easier Updates, More Versatile Revenue Model***

Once the administrative toolset and content-management system are released into production, Forte and his colleagues are anticipating substantial benefits. For example, some of the administrative tools (now available in beta form) already are helping to simplify survey updates. “In the past, a database professional had to do these updates, but now, virtually any Zagat employee can handle the task through a simple, Web-based interface,” Forte says.



Even more significant are the benefits Zagat anticipates for its partnership endeavors. Traditionally, Zagat has provided online partners such as travel agencies and hotels with text-based copies of its database so visitors to the respective partner sites do not have to leave the sites to obtain the latest restaurant ratings. But with the SOAP-enabled administrative toolset, Zagat will provide these partners with search capabilities against the database itself. This approach will eliminate the need for monthly updating and distribution of individual copies of the database, enabling Zagat to redeploy one full-time technical employee to the more lucrative activity of application development.

The new approach also will enhance the current revenue model that Zagat offers to partners using the database. For example, under the new, SOAP-based approach, Zagat can move from a monthly or yearly fee to a per-search fee, an idea the company has been unable to pursue in the current environment because it would require that Zagat track the searches taking place on its partners' servers—a costly and complex undertaking. "We'll be able to offer our partners more flexibility in their choice of fee structures as well as easier and more timely access to data," Forte explains. "This means we'll have a far more attractive package to offer."

For its part, the content-management system "will totally revamp the way Zagat handles data collection, management, and publication," as Forte puts it. In the meantime, development of the system is proceeding smoothly, thanks largely to the XML support in Visual Basic .NET. "We're taking full advantage of the product's automatic XML display and manipulation capabilities, as well as its XML-enabled custom controls such as list boxes, drop-down boxes, and toolbars," he reports. "It's great knowing that we don't have to build any of those controls ourselves, since Visual Basic .NET has already done it for us."

### ***Twice the Efficiency Means Faster Time-to-Market***

For Zagat developers, all this makes not only for an easier development process but a faster one as well. As Forte points out, time-to-market is plainly the most compelling advantage of working with Visual Basic .NET, with SOAP, and with other Microsoft .NET technologies. In fact, Zagat developers have already observed a striking contrast with past projects of similar functionality. "Since we no longer have to do any scripting to create powerful Web services, we're able to work twice as efficiently as we did before," Forte says. "This means finally being able to take full advantage of the programmability of the Web—delivering solutions when we need them and not a moment later."

### ***For More Information***

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