IBM

Saab uses Domino, DB2 and Java to improve customer service.

Saab Cars USA is delivering a brand new model to its business line, but this model doesn't have four wheels. With the rollout of Intranet Retailer Information System (IRIS), Saab is using e-business to develop stronger ties with dealers and customers alike, boosting customer satisfaction while allowing its growing network of dealers and service technicians to work more efficiently.

"We needed to bridge the gap between the dealer and the legacy systems.... They [IBM] have saved us approximately 15 to 20 man years by eliminating the need for legacy coding."

—Jerry Rode, Director of
Information Services, Saab Cars USA

IRIS, a Java-based extranet for the car-maker's 225 dealers and 20 service centers in the United States, allows dealers and technicians to order parts, track inventories, trace deliveries, check warranties and maintain service histories. Saab wanted to give the dealers things they haven't had, such as Lotus Notes-based e-mail and a graphical user interface that would work with legacy systems as well as the newer AS/400 system and the dealers' workstations.

Prior to IRIS's rollout, Saab didn't have a central data repository. Records about service, ownership, warranties and parts were scattered among three systems: an AS/400 at Saab's US headquarters in Norcross, GA, an IBM System/390 mainframe at Saab's parts distributor and a dealer-management system at dealerships. As a result, not everyone had access to the same information, which made it difficult to provide customers with the same quality of customer service as the car-maker puts into the products rolling off its assembly lines. "In essence, IRIS needed to bridge the gap between the dealer and the

Application	Retailer information system
Business Benefits	15–20 man years saved by eliminating legacy coding; potential to increase dealer productivity by 25% and reduce calls from dealers to Saab by 80%
Software	Lotus® Domino™ Lotus Notes® IBM® DB2/400™ Java™
Hardware	IBM System/390® IBM AS/400®
Services	IBM Global Services

With help from IBM, Saab Cars USA is putting the customer at the wheel with its extranet-based IRIS solution.

legacy systems," says Jerry Rode, director of IS at Saab Cars USA. "It was essential that we supply everyone in a car dealership with the same information." Rode adds, "The pilot phase went so well that every dealer wanted to be first in line during rollout."

With the possibility of increasing productivity 25 percent at each dealer site, it's not hard to understand why IRIS is in high demand. Saab also expects to reap the benefits. It estimates that calls from dealers to Saab will decrease 80 percent with the introduction of its extranet.

IBM in the driver's seat

One of Saab's requirements for the solution was that it be hardware platform independent because of the variety of client workstations at dealer locations. Using Lotus Domino and a Java application from IBM Business Partner CST Inc., Saab was able to achieve this goal by creating the IRIS system.

Users log on to the IRIS system through a Web browser interface at the dealer location, and IRIS links to the back-end Saab databases and applications residing on the carmaker's existing systems. Domino works as the principal Web and messaging server, while CST's Jacada for Java provides the graphical interface to the legacy systems. A Java applet launched from the interface pulls data from an IBM DB2/400 relational database, installed on an IBM AS/400. As a result, workstation users at the retail sites are able to access existing data regardless of what type of system they are using. DB2 interprets the request and sends it back to the Java interface where the data streams are plugged into the appropriate applet and delivered to the dealer's Web browser.

"None of our competitors had ever done an extranet-based solution. They each have their own servers sitting out there in the dealership with some kind of dedicated line back to the manufacturer. But that's not the route we saw as the way of the future," Rode says. "The IBM Global Services team learned our business very, very rapidly, and their superb technicians communicated very well with our user community. They have saved us approximately

15 to 20 man years by eliminating the need for legacy coding."

Accelerating the advantages

Clearly, IRIS promises significant savings in time and money for Saab and its independent franchise owners, as well as a new means by which to pull precious marketing data from owner profiles. Users have information at their fingertips on every aspect of any vehicle Saab manufactures. But perhaps the most impressive benefit of this new e-business solution is the unprecedented level of unity in communication and purpose within the network of Saab retailers that lends the needed stronghold in winning customer approval.

"Saab field personnel will have the same point of entry to IRIS as the people here at Saab headquarters," Rode explains. "So everyone using the system can access exactly the same information."

Travel the information superhighway

This innovative e-business solution stems from a multilevel initiative to realign Saab from the ground up in what is termed a renaissance of Saab cars in the USA. The carmaker is in the process of changing the look and feel of its dealerships to refocus emphasis on the customer and, in turn, raise the bottom line for the company — a total of 63 major IBM e-business enhancements are on the drawing board.

Linked with Saab's back-end parts, warranty, service, customer and financial systems, the company is exploring the possibilities of other Web-based initiatives including direct accessory and parts sales. "We're working on a capability to allow our customers using the public Internet to input service information about their car, even if they do it themselves," Rode explains. "If they change the oil themselves, if they go to a local lube shop, or whatever — we'll track it if they key it in."

"It's an excellent system," says Rode. "Using e-business to create a total dealer system with the customer at the wheel is well on the way to becoming the Saab way."

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