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IBM package gets e-commerce right

REVIEW: WEBSPHERE COMMERCE 5.5 DOES MANY THINGS WELL BUT COMES AT A HIGH PRICE

By Jim Rapoza

IBM'S WEBSPHERE COMMERCE 5.5 PROVIDES enterprises with an extremely powerful and flexible platform for handling online business, from business-to-consumer to business-to-business to hosted services.

During tests, eWEEK Labs was impressed with the breadth of e-business capabilities in WebSphere Commerce 5.5 and the quality of all its features. Unlike many products that try to do everything and end up doing nothing well, WebSphere Commerce is the rare application that does many things and does many of them well.

WebSphere Commerce 5.5, which shipped in June, is an excellent platform for running the most complex B2B and B2C e-commerce operations, and it can run both simultaneously, which allows for excellent integration between both sides of a company's business.

However, given the high price of WebSphere Commerce 5.5, a company will need all this functionality to justify the cost: WebSphere Commerce Business Edition 5.5, the version we reviewed, starts at $125,000 per processor. The lower-end Professional Edition starts at $80,000 per processor. These prices put WebSphere Commerce 5.5 well above competing products from vendors including BroadVision Inc. and Microsoft Corp., although WebSphere Commerce is still less expensive than competing products from Blue Martini Software Inc.

WebSphere Commerce also has hefty system requirements, so companies should plan to run it on their biggest and most capable servers. On the plus side, like the other WebSphere servers, WebSphere Commerce runs on a wide variety of operating systems, including Linux, several Unix variants and Windows servers. The application can work with IBM's DB2 database or Oracle Corp.'s Oracle database.

The new quick-installation option for WebSphere Commerce 5.5 made it simple to install the entire platform on a single system. However, this is mainly useful for testing and evaluation; we wouldn't recommend running a production environment of this application on a single system.

The administration interfaces for WebSphere Commerce have been improved in this version, and we found each management interface intuitive and capable. However, there are potentially five administration interfaces that can be accessed to define different parameters for sites and stores. We found this to be a little confusing, especially during setup and high-level administration. The frustration level should go down as the application is deployed because most site and store managers will access only one or, at the most, two of the interfaces.

One major improvement in WebSphere Version 5.5 is its powerful, detailed analytical capabilities. With these improved analytics, we could do extensive data mining to detect and analyze trends in our products and customers. Also included is an extensive Reporting Framework that made it possible to quickly get information on any aspect of the e-commerce system.

One of the strongest aspects of WebSphere Commerce 5.5 is how well it handles B2C and B2B commerce. On the B2C side, the product includes the ability to handle advanced product promotions and discounts. We also liked the new catalog filters that made it possible to quickly turn different parts of our catalog on and off. Through integration with IBM's Lotus Software division's collaboration tools, it is also possible to add capable, real-time customer service capabilities to a store.

On the B2B side, WebSphere Commerce now makes it possible to define and maintain a wide variety of value chains for different business

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

WebSphere Commerce 5.5 IBM's (www.ibm.com) powerful

e-commerce application gives enterprises all the capabilities they will need in a single platform and does so without sacrificing quality. However, companies interested in WebSphere Commerce will want to make sure that their needs are high-end enough to justify the high-end cost of the product.

KEY PERFORMANCE INDICATORS	
USABILITY	GOOD
CAPABILITY	EXCELLENT
PERFORMANCE	GOOD
INTEROPERABILITY	EXCELLENT
MANAGEABILITY	GOOD
SCALABILITY	EXCELLENT
SECURITY	GOOD

➕ Wide range of high-quality B2B and B2C e-commerce capabilities; includes robust analytics.
➖ Multiple administration interfaces can be confusing; high priced.

EVALUATION SHORT LIST • Blue Martini • BroadVision e-commerce solutions • Microsoft's Jupiter

models. This makes it possible to create private marketplaces, hosted services and complex multivendor purchase systems.

We also liked the improved contracts and RFQ (request for quote) capabilities in WebSphere Commerce. These make it possible for business buyers to define unique product requirements that sellers can attempt to meet through custom design or through existing products (see screen, right).

We appreciated the several sample stores provided with WebSphere Commerce, which proved useful for learning how to set up many types of stores and supply chains.

Like many other enterprise applications, WebSphere Commerce, which is based on Java 2 Platform, Enterprise Edition and XML, includes support for delivering and consuming Web services. *e*

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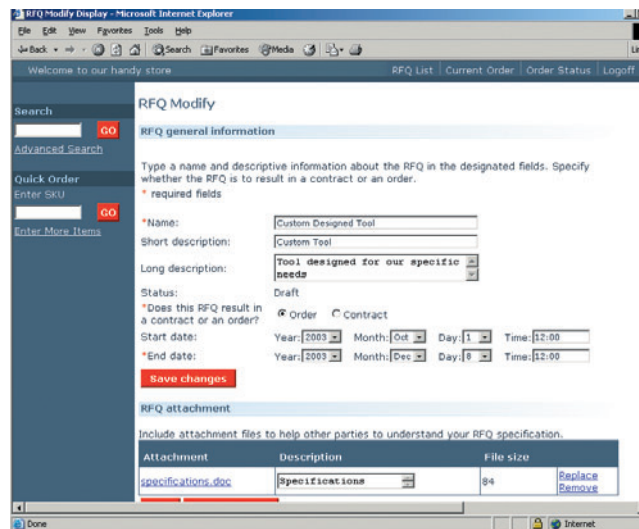
RFQ in WebSphere Commerce lets B2B buyers define product requirements.