

BlackBerry Custom Application Offers Competitive Edge for Largest Supplier of Construction Materials



Lafarge North America is the largest diversified supplier of construction materials in the U.S. and Canada. One goal for Lafarge is to continually increase its focus on the customer. Lafarge's gypsum operations identified an opportunity to accomplish this by better managing market demands and fluctuations in its gypsum pricing model. As the gypsum market fluctuates, so does the volume of price adjustments; thereby requiring more interaction from the price approver. By helping the gypsum sales managers react swiftly to market demands, Lafarge knew it could increase its competitive advantage, and improve service to valued customers.

In 2003, Lafarge began improving the efficiency of price approvals, which were only possible via direct access to the JD Edwards EnterpriseOne XE version. That meant when the approving manager was traveling, approvals were not always given as conveniently and promptly as Lafarge preferred.

Wireless access would allow management to quickly complete pricing approval requests faster. Using BlackBerry® handhelds on the BlackBerry Enterprise Server™, equipped with Mobile Data Service (MDS), they created a custom application that would integrate with their Lotus® Domino environment. Two partners – Flowfinity Wireless and CGI – helped Lafarge develop a mobile pricing approvals custom application that integrated with their JD Edwards EnterpriseOne XE system.

Because they already had 1,500 BlackBerry handhelds deployed across the worldwide company, Lafarge wanted to leverage their existing BlackBerry investment to deploy the new application to 10 key users. The benefits of the solution include:

- Quicker response times to customers
- Immediate access to back end systems which affect company profitability
- Less reliance on being tied to the desktop
- Ease of use and availability
- Fewer devices to carry, including laptops
- Less reliance on telephones and reduced cell phone charges

The ability to manage market demands is critical to Lafarge's ability to satisfy its customers and manage its own profitability. Until recently, it relied on a system that was dependent on opportunity and a variety of technologies.

Industry

Construction Materials

Situation

Lafarge's North American gypsum operations needed to improve the efficiency of translating pricing changes for raw materials to their customers. Their current system was slow and relied on pagers, phones and laptops – which did not help them to respond fast enough to changing market conditions.

Organization Profile

Lafarge North America is the largest diversified supplier of construction materials in the U.S. and Canada, with a workforce of 15,500 in more than 1,000 locations. Gypsum – also known as wallboard – is one of its three key divisions.

Solution

Lafarge already had a substantial BlackBerry deployment to 1,500 users companywide. Its gypsum operations realized it could leverage that investment by developing a custom application for BlackBerry that would transmit instant notifications of price changes and immediate approvals. The application – built by systems integration and consulting firm CGI using the Flowfinity Solutions Platform for BlackBerry – integrated with the company's JD Edwards EnterpriseOne XE system.

Results

Sales people would now rather carry a BlackBerry handheld than their laptop. Customers receive instant decisions, which contribute to customer satisfaction. Pricing decisions are translated into the back end ERP system, which helps manage company profitability.

Pricing changes are managed through a back-end ERP/supply chain system, JD Edwards EnterpriseOne XE version. Sales managers need approval from their national or regional account managers before passing on a price change to a customer. The process relied on phone calls, pages and logging into the ERP application on a laptop to transmit pricing approval.

"Unless a sales manager was sitting in front of their PC at the moment the price changed, decisions couldn't be turned around in a time sensitive manner," says Tim Finley, Team Leader – Gypsum Applications. "We have more than 20 core product families, tied closely to a dynamic building materials market. When the market allows prices to decline, we want to be able to pass this savings onto our customers as quickly as possible."

Building on an Existing BlackBerry Investment

Finley and Saxe knew they were looking at building a custom application, but had not made a decision about the right platform to use. After initial product comparisons between PocketPC and BlackBerry, they realized that BlackBerry offered a compelling product platform. "Any time you consider a wireless, custom solution your costs tend to escalate quickly," says Finley. "For us, PocketPC was projected to cost too much to achieve the functionality that is native to BlackBerry, at a much lower cost."

Lafarge already had 1,500 BlackBerry handhelds deployed companywide. In the gypsum operations in North America, 75 users were on BlackBerry handhelds. They began to realize that one way to keep costs down was to build on their existing BlackBerry infrastructure and use their Lotus Notes email system as part of the solution.

"We realized we could keep our existing workflow on email," says Brandon Saxe, IT Business Analyst on the project. "That knocked one piece off the puzzle. It was a definite benefit that BlackBerry was email-based."

Working with Partners

The team then discovered Flowfinity Wireless offered an enterprise application development platform for BlackBerry that could be used to build the high performance enterprise application they wanted for BlackBerry. The Flowfinity Solutions Platform offered Lafarge a solutions development kit that meant they could implement the system faster, and with less risk, than a traditional development project.

Flowfinity brought in one of its partners, CGI, to implement the solution and integrate it to the existing ERP system. CGI is a leader in providing systems integration services and consulting in Canada and the U.S.

As a partnership, the team of two in-house and two external partners developed the Mobile Pricing Approval solution. Lafarge worked with its sales teams to analyze their needs and communicated the specifications to Flowfinity and CGI.

The resulting advanced notification solution is a simple process. When a price approval is required from a particular sales manager, the ERP application passes the request to the Mobile Price Approvals system. The price approval request form is immediately transmitted to the manager's BlackBerry handheld by the Flowfinity software. The manager is also notified of the request by email.

The sales manager has everything he or she needs to make a decision on the handheld: customer information, date of transaction, as well as old and new prices. Most importantly, they have the online ability to accept or reject the pricing change. If they reject the change, they can submit comments to explain the decision. The information is then transmitted to the back end system and the sales person can act on it immediately.

"The Flowfinity product allowed us to leverage our BlackBerry investment," says Finley. "It's pretty difficult, and often costly to extend your ERP system to mobile devices, but Flowfinity's customizable platform bridged the gap between the BlackBerry Enterprise Server and our ERP system – safely and responsibly. It's really the glue of the solution."

"We really think that XML is the way to send data across platforms," says Saxe. "CGI helped us leverage the XML technology in PeopleSoft and Flowfinity to create a bidirectional transaction that has changed the way our sales people respond to customers."

Success Factors

During the three-month implementation process, the company had some supports in place, which made the process run smoother.

One benefit was the custom application development coincided with changes taking place to its existing ERP system. Since the approvals process was undergoing its own standardization, it made it much easier to define the parameters of the systems' requirements at the initial stage of the project.

"Having a standardized and stable approval process allowed us to move this application from a laptop to a wireless configuration." says Saxe.

Another success factor was management's support during the design of the solution. Finley and Saxe worked closely with the sales team to define what they needed. User involvement meant the solution was exactly what was needed and quickly adopted by the sales people.

"Several people have stopped our IT Director in the halls and commented on how much they like the solution," says Finley. "In fact, many of them would now rather use the BlackBerry handheld than a laptop. Much of this can be attributed to the symbiotic relationship we had during development between the sales and the development teams, and our partners."

Benefits and Anticipated ROI

Lafarge can point to several benefits of their new pricing approval system, such as:

- Quicker response times to customers
- Immediate input into back end systems which affect company profitability
- Less reliance on being tied to the desktop
- Ease of use and availability
- Convergence of devices mean less hardware to carry
- Less reliance on telephones and reduced cell phone charges



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