

Things Change

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Those of us who have been in the “software for the soft goods industry” business for a couple of decades have witnessed some interesting and exciting changes over the years. Some of these enhancements might seem trivial while others are obviously major, but either way it is worthwhile to note what is new and how it impacts the business.

Perhaps the most obvious difference between programs of yesterday and today is the Graphical User Interface (GUI). On a cursory level it is apparent that GUI screens are easier to interpret and read than their character based, or “green screen” counterparts. How many of us have had to really study the computer screen to even figure out if we were entering an order or making an availability inquiry? This issue that all but disappears with a GUI.

While ease of use is a terrific advantage of GUI, it is not the biggest one. The ability to have multiple windows open simultaneously can cause a huge jump in personal productivity. When a user can leave open the order entry window mid-order, open the style master window to add a new color of that style, and then return to the half-entered order to add that new style-color, it makes that user more productive.

Naturally, the above scenario presupposes that the user in question has the security and authority to actually enter styles as well as orders, but the point is that the software does not have to limit what a given user can do when the GUI allows for multiple simultaneous operations.

Another important improvement over the “old way” has to do with the cost sheets and bills of material (BOMs) that might accompany a finished goods style. Back then, the style master contained not only the description, price and other data about the style but also often held the details of the cost sheet and/or BOM for that style.

Of course, today’s new reality is that a single finished goods style might be sourced from multiple factories and locations. To accommodate this, programs like BlueCherry Enterprise allow for the creation of multiple cost sheets and BOMs for a given style-color. This way, a manufacturer that both produces entirely domestically and also has a foreign contractor making a certain style can maintain two BOMs (one with all of the components, the other perhaps for labels) and two cost sheets (the former with raw material costs and overhead, the latter with duty and freight charges). New ERP software like BlueCherry is flexible enough to keep up with the way business is actually being done today.

The topic of style master actually raises another change; namely, the separation of style from season. Until now, when a style was set up in the computer it would be associated with a season. That was fine, until management decided that the style was popular enough to sell in the following season. Typically this meant that someone would have to do a lot of data handling to move the style into the new season – move inventory, possibly create a new style number, etc.

Newly designed software can eliminate those hassles. In BlueCherry, for example, while style is associated with a season (even to the color level) it is not part of the so-called index key. This means that the season can be changed without going through a lot of gyrations. Meanwhile, the sales and production orders having seasons associated to them, so if management wants to see how much 100-RED shipped last fall it is a simple matter to make such a report.

In fact, this brings us to another area which has advanced significantly over the years – that of flexible reporting to retrieve data as desired. Here the contrast between old and new is staggering.

In programs created using older computer languages, reports and inquiries were essentially the resultant output of a sub-program in the system designed for that purpose. Thus, if one wanted to change a report to sort by sales rep, say, rather than by customer, it would take a computer programmer some number of hours of programming time to reconfigure the report as desired. This translated to costs in both money and time, and led to people occasionally forgoing a desired report alteration rather than having to increase a budget or wait for a few weeks.

Thanks to relational databases and advanced reporting tools that can access them, reporting today is a different story. Third party reporting tools like Cognos, Business Objects or Crystal Reports (now owned by Business Objects) give users flexibility if they build the appropriate data dictionary to let them work. Even better are built in reporting tools that require no programming at all. In BlueCherry, for example, users (again, with security rights) can actually create a report or, more commonly, take an existing one, copy it and make the desired changes to the copy.

As you can see, quite a few things have changed quite a bit over the years in the software business, perhaps even more than they have in the apparel and footwear industries. I have not even mentioned object orientation, user-defined fields, automatic email notification, supply chain collaboration with suppliers. The revolutionary changes in software have allowed us to keep up with the fast-paced industry evolution that we experience every day and will continue to experience as our industries evolve.

Paul Magel is Senior Vice President for BlueCherry Application Solutions at Computer Generated Solutions, Inc. (CGS). BlueCherry is a suite of technically superior solutions encompassing Enterprise Resource Planning, Supply Chain Management, Sales Force Automation and Customer Relationship Management.

CGS provides innovative solutions that fulfill the information technology and business needs of apparel and footwear manufacturers, importers and retailers. For 20 years, CGS solutions have provided dramatic and rapid return on investment along with the tangible benefits of streamlining business processes and escalating sales efficiencies while offering superior training and customer support. For more information, visit www.cgsinc.com.

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