Coming Up In the World

J.D. Edwards' ERP software gives firms the manufacturing edge

BY ESTHER SHEIN

LIKE THE DAREDEVIL SHOE AND APPAREL lines it manufactures and markets to skateboarders, water skiers and rock climbers, Vans Inc. is taking a no-holds-barred approach when it comes to the technology needed to pump out its products.

The $160 million alternative sports company has upped the ante from shipping 8,000 pairs of shoes a day to churning out 60,000 pairs every 8 hours, with a 100 percent increase in business in the past 18 months, according to company officials. At the same time, Vans has increased its manufacturing load to production of 30,000 pairs of shoes a week, says Gary Dunlap, vice president of Information Services for Vans, in Santa Fe Springs, Calif.

The secret to Vans' success? Officials credit the deployment of World, ERP (enterprise resource planning) software from J.D. Edwards & Co., which the company is now running on OS/400 on an AS/400. "Without the [J.D. Edwards] manufacturing system, the scheduling of orders would be an impossibility," since Vans does not manufacture to stock but to order, explains Dunlap. "Without the distribution software, we couldn't order, stock, pick, pack and ship in that volume. It's allowed us to increase our business" with inventory accuracy of 99.7 percent, he says.

New horizons

While many companies are turning to ERP packages to streamline manufacturing and retail operations, products typically associated with the rollouts come from better-known players such as SAP AG, Baan Co. and PeopleSoft Inc., to name a few. Hoping to capitalize on its growing success with traditional customers such as Vans, J.D. Edwards is looking to expand into more competitive ERP territory with last year's release of OneWorld, an open systems ERP package with Java functions and a GUI that runs on Windows NT, Unix, IBM MVS and network computers.

It was OneWorld's open architecture that convinced Woodard Inc., a manufacturer of high-end wrought-iron and aluminum outdoor and casual furniture, to deploy the software on an Intel Corp.-based Digital Equipment Corp. Prioris server running NT and an Oracle Corp. database.

Woodard, which moved from an AS/400 to Digital just prior to the OneWorld in-

RETURN TO SENDER

Instead of getting inundated with Web E-mail, Bose pulled the plug on that form of communication. Learn how to avoid the static
☐ BY ERIN CALLAWAY

PROPERTY OF U.S. POSTAL SERVICE
U.S. MAIL
U.S. MAIL

PHOTO: JOEL WEISBERG

Bose's Paul Olean wants a structure in place before he opens the floodgates for E-mail to be pouring over the company's Web site (www.bose.com).

REMEMBER ELVIS PRESLEY CROONING ABOUT RETURNED LOVE LETters? Try E-mailing Bose Corp. via the company's Web site, and the King's old song just might come to mind. While Bose is confident its sound equipment can blast out a perfect tune, it's less sanguine about its ability to manage and respond to the large volumes of incoming customer E-mail. So for now, the company is not accepting messages, encouraging buyers to seek other means of communication.

The Framingham, Mass., high-tech manufacturer refuses to open the floodgates until it finds a way to route and track the mail and, more important, respond quickly to customer requests with more than a canned response. "We didn't have the systems in place to do that [when we launched the Web site], so rather than frustrate people, we thought it was better to be honest," says Paul Olean, director of customer relationship development. The Bose site (www.bose.com) displays a prominent note to explain to customers why they can't send E-mail.

The irony is, Bose actually wants to confer with customers via E-mail. But developing the technical infrastructure that would allow it to fire back a rapid reply and keep track of all customer communiqués is not as easy as it might seem. Currently, there is a dearth of off-the-shelf software designed specifically to manage Web E-mail. Instead, companies are being forced to hire dedicated E-mail support staffs, scrutinize non-E-mail products for a hint of management capabilities or even build their own E-mail management systems. Their alternative: Do nothing and pray they don't get caught in an E-mail tidal wave, leaving customers high and dry.

Unfortunately, most companies fail to consider whether they are prepared to accept E-mail until they start having problems. "Planning is really the big missing link here," says Paul Moniz, vice president of technology for the Electronic Messaging Association, in Arlington, Va. Companies where Web development is handled by nontechnical departments, such as marketing, are most at risk, since they are more likely to see the allure of Web E-mail but overlook the impact a sudden E-mail rush could have on technical and human resources.

The gatekeepers

One of the most common mistakes companies make, for example, is to use the E-mail address of one or two individuals as the point of entry for all messages. At first, an individual might have no trouble managing the inbound communications. However, the task can quickly become a burden for the person stuck routing all messages to co-workers. Likewise, if only one person is serving as the E-mail gatekeeper, customers can be left in the lurch if that person is suddenly unavailable.

Bose's Olean, for one, didn't want to run into any of those problems. But his strategy of avoiding Web E-mail entirely until the company is fully prepared to deal with the new medium also has its drawbacks. "[Not accepting E-mail] is pretty unfriendly and countercultural on the Net," says Joyce Grath, an analyst at Gartner Group Inc., in Stamford, Conn. Nor is it a foolproof approach. Companies should never underestimate the impact of Web surfers who "hunt and peck" through a site until they come across the Webmaster's address or figure out how the company renders internal E-mail addresses, says Grath. She suggests companies prepare to manage E-mail manually with personnel borrowed from their telephone support staffs, even if they aren't officially accepting E-mail.

Olean admits that several messages have slipped through the cracks, despite Bose's attempts to stave off the onslaught. (He's actually using these slips as an opportunity to train the staff who will manage Web E-mail once a system is in place). Olean is determined to start off right, finding an automated E-mail management system with specific features that will track messages,

Web E-Mail

so customers who send more than one note aren't treated like strangers. For Olean, it boils down to delivering quality customer service. "We want it to be very simple, off-the-shelf if possible," he says.

Product shortage

Unfortunately, Olean is finding out first-hand that there are currently few products available that are specifically designed to manage inbound Web E-mail. Though he hopes to have the issue resolved by the end of the summer, he has yet to find an appropriate package. To that end, Bose, like many other companies, may end up using products designed for other purposes to solve the problem (see story, right).

There is hope, however. EchoMail, a product from Millennium Cybernetics Inc. (www.interactive.com), in Cambridge,

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Message received

Follow these best practices to get the most out of Web E-mail:

▶ Don't think of E-mail links on a Web site as just a means of sending a message. Think of them as response mechanisms that initiate workflow processes.

▶ Organize Web E-mail addresses according to categories that drive internal workflow processes.

▶ Don't make E-mail response dependent on one person (for example, send mail to john.doe@company.com). Use a generic E-mail address that can be routed to anyone.

▶ Avoid E-mail that gives customers free reign to write as much as they choose. Use forms to structure Web E-mail so it is easier to integrate into a database or workflow.

Source: The Registry Inc.

Mass., uses a core technology to do pattern recognition and to classify and route inbound Web E-mail. Once it is classified, the E-mail can be funneled through an internal E-mail system, through a corporate intranet, or to a fax machine or pager. The product also creates E-mail tracking reports and allows users to "mine" the resulting data.

Modem Media, a large agency that provides interactive marketing, Web development and other services to companies such as AT&T Corp., Delta Airlines and Citibank, has been using EchoMail since January 1996 to help several clients manage Web E-mail. "[The clients] are very concerned about customer service and minimizing cost," explains Bob Allen, president and CEO of the Westport, Conn., company. "Any time you have thousands of E-mails that never get [answered], and there is no control mechanism for routing, there is a concern."

WebLeader E-MailRoom, a Web-based E-mail routing application from ErgoTech, in New York (www.ergo-tech.com), is an

other product aimed at helping companies with this problem. Unveiled last month at PC Expo and currently in beta testing, WebLeader E-MailRoom requires a Lotus Domino 4.5 server running OS/2 Warp or Windows NT and should be generally available later this month for an introductory price of about $100. Using the Notes search engine, WebLeader E-MailRoom searches the text of free-form E-mail messages and then applies business rules to route the messages to the appropriate recipient.

Clay Womack, president of Direct Stock Market, a startup online trading company in Santa Monica, Calif., is hoping WebLeader E-MailRoom will allow him to free up the two full-time staffers currently assigned as E-mail gatekeepers to do other tasks. Right now, they are fielding several hundred inquiries a month. But "we have plenty of stuff to do besides something that should be automated," says Womack.

People power

For now, the lack of packaged software has many companies trying to manage their Web E-mail the old-fashioned way—with people. Coca-Cola Co., for one, increased the size of its E-mail response team after experiencing a major Web E-mail overload during last summer's Olympic Games in Atlanta. During the Games, just one person was dedicated to responding to E-mail. Today, the company has five people on the job, organized so each one handles a different type of inquiry. One person, for example, answers E-mail requests that require further research, one handles quick response inquiries and another deals with questions that beg a customized answer.

Likewise, L.L. Bean, the Freeport, Maine, retailer, has 16 full-time "new media representatives" who field more than 2,500 E-mail inquiries a month. "We look for people who have some technical orientation, but more important, they need to be good writers," says an L.L. Bean spokeswoman. The emphasis on good communication has already paid off: By paying attention to customer inquiries, the company concluded it should develop Quick Shop, a new application on the L.L. Bean Web site that allows customers to place orders by typing in the product number and other order information.

Mark Benerofe, vice president of programming and platform development for Sony Online Ventures Inc., in New York, also is relying on people—not technology—to manage inbound Web E-mail. "The Net and our business are evolving so quickly that it would probably take as much resources to constantly update the software system as it would to have a hybrid approach of humans and software," says Benerofe. Rather than devoting in-house staff to the task, however, Benerofe outsourced Sony Online's E-mail management to Matrixx Marketing, a customer management company in Cincinnati. As part of its CyberResponse service, Matrixx provides trained E-mail customer service representatives and E-mail tracking and reporting. "We wanted to outsource because it

would have been an inefficient use of resources and very expensive to do [E-mail management] in New York," adds Benerofe. In particular, Sony Online—which manages all the Sony promotional Web sites, provides online technology for Sony Corp. and hosts a Web entertainment network—needed an E-mail support staff that would be able to accommodate frequent but irregular spikes in E-mail volume. Those increases could be fueled by new online programming, seasonal programming changes and additions of new technology such as chat rooms, explains Benerofe.

DirectTV, a unit of Hughes Electronics, in El Segundo, Calif., also has outsourced its E-mail management to Matrixx. With more than 2.6 million satellite programming subscribers nationwide, DirectTV receives an average of 100 E-mail messages a day. Not only does Matrixx guarantee all E-mail will be answered within 24 hours, its reporting and tracking capabilities have helped DirectTV compile valuable customer information that would have been hard to finger had they managed E-mail in-house. "We would have had to build the reporting mechanism from scratch, and you can't do analysis by hand anymore," says Andrea Jacobs, vice president of customer service at DirectTV.

Unfortunately, outsourcing E-mail man-

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agement—to Matrixx, anyway—won't work for everyone. Currently, Cyber-Response is available only to those customers who are already using Matrixx for call-center management. The company recognizes that not all users need both functions, but there are no current plans to spin CyberResponse off as a separate product, says a Matrixx spokeswoman.

And while one of the biggest advantages to outsourcing may be having a well-trained, dedicated and sizable staff on hand to deal with E-mail, that isn't necessarily the real problem. Take Bose's Olean. He isn't worried about whether Bose has enough employees or E-mail expertise to respond to customers' E-mail. Says Olean: "That doesn't concern us as much as the ability to stay on top of and control the management of the information." Hopefully, finding a way to reach that goal won't leave him singing the E-mail blues. ◀

E-Mail Management Without the E-Mail

So what if products for managing Web E-mail are on the way? The real issue is, how can companies deal with this problem now? Surprisingly, applications not typically associated with E-mail may provide some immediate relief.

Consider Footprints, a Web-based problem-tracking and help-desk application from UniPress Software Inc., of Edison, N.J., which offers many E-mail management features. Footprints' problem-tracking system, for example, would allow companies to respond quickly to customer E-mail but without firing back an automatic canned response. The way it works: A user submits an E-mail, which is automatically posted to the database and assigned a ticket number. The user is alerted that the E-mail has been received and, at the same time, a help-desk administrator receives notification of the "call." When the problem has been addressed, the user receives another E-mail message telling how the problem has been resolved.

Footprints also maintains an ongoing log of all user inquiries. That means if companies used Footprints as an E-mail management tool, they could recognize repeat customers, for example, simply by sorting through the database. There are some drawbacks to this approach, however. Messages coming into Footprints can be sorted into categories, but they aren't automatically routed to specific individuals based on the content of the message. Consequently, some manual routing is still necessary.

Vendors such as Neuron Data Inc., a

Mountain View, Calif., company that develops rules-based applications, also may help. "[E-mail management] is on our radar screen, though it's not an official product design," says a spokesman from Neuron. Later this year, Neuron will release a sales-force automation application, for example, that will have an intelligent E-mail component. The product will use Neuron's Java-based rules engine, called Advisor/J, to route and filter E-mail that comes in from the Web.

Intelligent E-mail capabilities also are part of OverQuota, a Notes-based sales-force automation tool from MFJ International, in New York. Using the Notes messaging architecture, OverQuota associates E-mails with specific functions in the software, such as creating a calendar item. In that scenario, the user could click on a button to relate an E-mail message to setting up a meeting, for example. The pertinent information—such as the time of the meeting and who will attend—would automatically be sent to OverQuota's calendar.

Ultimately, the tools may not be as important as how companies think about the whole process of receiving and processing E-mail coming in from Web sites. "You want the [E-mail] to be as structured as possible without offending the submitter. Get it down to the categories you use to internally drive workflow, and you'll be light years ahead," says Ken Lownie, senior consultant with The Registry, a nationwide consulting firm based in Newton, Mass.

—E.C.