



Partner: Auto~Star

Web Site: www.auto-star.com

Partner Size: 26 employees

Country or Region: Canada

Industry: Professional services

Partner Profile

Medicine Hat, Alberta-based Auto~Star develops software applications that help large-scale retailers reliably collect, organize, and automate business-operations information.

Software and Services

- Services
 - Microsoft® Partner Program
 - Microsoft Technology Centers (MTC)

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Partner Expects Annual Growth of 50 Percent Due to Access, Exposure, Technical Help

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Robert Symmonds, President, Auto~Star

After Auto~Star decided to make the shift to base its solutions on Microsoft® technologies, the software developer joined the Microsoft Partner Program. The program has helped the company improve its products, reduce its time-to-market, decrease labor costs, and increase its value to customers. As a result, Auto~Star anticipates year-over-year revenue growth of 50 percent and a greater market opportunity.

Business Needs

For years, Auto~Star stayed true to its independent roots by developing its technology solutions internally and from the ground up. The company, after all, was started by two brothers who sold their car dealership and went out on their own to pursue careers in building technology solutions that support automotive enterprises. Since its start in 1982, Auto~Star has expanded to serve retail establishments of all sizes and in a range of industries, providing them with point of sale, merchandise management, inventory control, and consolidated reporting solutions.

The company gradually shifted away from acting as the full-scale provider of IT for its customer base. “We used to deliver complete, turnkey solutions ourselves—from software development to hardware support—and we didn’t have partnerships with any of the major providers,” recalls Ivan Long, Director of Operations for Auto~Star. “When we decided to enter the United States market and further expand our retail business, we also narrowed our focus to developing business solutions, with a separate reseller channel to sell and support them.”

Auto~Star had built its retail solutions on the UNIX platform, but experienced difficulty

finding and retaining skilled professionals who could support that platform. In addition, the company wanted to make its products easier for retail employees to use, without intimidating command-line interfaces and text windows.

To address both its staff and usability concerns, Auto~Star began to develop its products on the Windows® operating system rather than the UNIX platform. “We had a fair degree of success with Microsoft® product-based development, but we suspected that there was more that we could do with the technologies,” says Long. “We had stumbled and been forced back to the proverbial drawing board multiple times. We had the impression that we were out there on our own, that there wasn’t anyone who could really help us.”

Solution

However, there was help to be had. In 2005, Auto~Star joined the Microsoft Partner Program. “All of a sudden, there was this whole new world of training, product expertise, and referral services that we’d never encountered before,” says Long. “We immediately started to make huge leaps forward.”

The company found that it could take advantage of many services from Microsoft to help support its strategic planning, technical proficiency, and business development. For instance, Auto~Star’s Microsoft Partner Account Manager (PAM) worked to connect the company with Microsoft resources that would help Auto~Star enhance the technical design of its products. In particular, the PAM suggested that Auto~Star visit a Microsoft Technology Center (MTC) for scalability testing on the new version of a product, with the goal of increasing scalability so that the product could run across thousands of sites. “We were

able to accomplish in two weeks at the MTC what would have taken us months or even years to do on our own,” says Robert Symmonds, President of Auto~Star.

Auto~Star employees also regularly participate in Microsoft-led training programs and attend business and technology events. Through those programs and events, Auto~Star meets key people within Microsoft and the retail industry.

In April 2007, the company took part in a lead-generation program that lasted for several months and resulted in a dozen well-qualified leads. Auto~Star also has been introduced to other members of the Microsoft partner ecosystem; together, the companies are investigating mutual business opportunities for cross-selling complementary products.

Benefits

Participation in the Microsoft Partner Program has provided Auto~Star with scalable technology that is resulting in the opportunity to target larger customers with thousands of stores, rather than hundreds. “We’ve seen such a great return on our partnership investment,” says Symmonds. “Microsoft goes to great lengths to prove its focus on and support for partners—we couldn’t ask for a better partnership.”

■ Opportunity for business growth.

Auto~Star received the support from Microsoft that it needed to increase the scale of its solutions and meet the right people, both from Microsoft and potential customers and partners. “The assistance that we receive from Microsoft has really expanded our market opportunity,” says Long. “For one thing, the technical support that we get through the program has placed our product development about

two years ahead of where we would have been had we continued down our independent path. We’re expecting to have year-over-year revenue growth of 50 percent, which just wouldn’t be possible without our relationship with Microsoft.”

■ **Added value for customers.** Auto~Star has found it easier to respond to specific customer requests because of its partnership with Microsoft. For instance, when a customer wanted to run an Auto~Star solution on mobile devices, Auto~Star turned to Microsoft for assistance. “We were able to deliver the solution that our customer needed—and do it quickly—because Microsoft provided the necessary expertise,” says Long. “With Microsoft support available to such a high degree, we can respond in days or weeks, rather than the months that it would take on our own.”

■ **Increased customer acceptance.** The partner’s use of Microsoft technology has made it more successful because customers, especially those in the retail industry, find it easier to adopt and integrate Microsoft solutions into their environments than those from other vendors. “When we mention that our solutions are based entirely on Microsoft technologies, prospective customers immediately become more receptive,” says Long. “They know that the solutions will be easier for their employees to use and support, and they’re more confident in their abilities to make the most of the solutions.”