

Auto-Star Compusystems Bases its Award-Winning POS Solution on the Microsoft .NET Platform

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Overview

Auto-Star Compusystems has been in the business of developing “state of the art” point of sale and retail management software since 1985. Over the past two decades, the organization has grown its client base and solutions to meet the evolving needs of the retail pharmaceutical industry. Based on customer demand, the management team began a review of development platforms on which to base the latest version of its Star-Plus solution. The team examined a number of options, including Linux. However after extensive research, Auto-Star chose to remain with Microsoft®, and began development on the .NET platform.

Auto-Star’s Star-Plus solution provides a solid framework in which to manage a pharmacy business. From easy-to-use features at the cash lane to complete reporting and analysis tools, Star Plus is fully customizable and provides the tools required to reduce costs and increase efficiencies.

Situation

Pharmacies and personal care retail outlets are one of the largest revenue generators within the Canadian retail landscape. According to Statistics Canada, pharmacies recorded profits of


\$21,266,566 in 2003, beating out department stores and hardware stores to be the top grosser.

With increasing competition between leading pharmacy outlets, it is critical for these retailers to have the right information at the right time, to help manage inventory more profitably. More and more retail pharmacies are turning to software vendors for technology solutions which will help to fuel growth and improve productivity.

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Solution

In order to remain competitive, Auto-Star strives to provide its client base with timely upgrades and new versions of its core product. Based on customer demand, the management team began a review of



platform options for its latest version of its Star-Plus solution. The team examined a number of development platforms, including Linux. However after extensive research, Auto-Star chose to remain with Microsoft, and began development on the .NET platform.

“We found that many of our clients were looking to see if we could provide them with a Linux-based solution to meet their business requirements and as a result, we began to investigate how viable it would be to switch our current Windows-based solution to a Linux-based solution,” says Robert Symmonds, General Manager, Auto-Star Compusystems. “However, we were very impressed when the Microsoft team came to the table and began work, not only with our organization, but with our client base as well. Their support on both fronts solidified our decision to keep developing our solution with Microsoft technologies.”

The Auto-Star team is committed to providing its customers with the latest and greatest technology solutions, and consequently provides frequent updates to its solutions to ensure that customers have access to the most recent technology on the market. To meet growing customer demand,

Auto-Star is presently converting the back-end components of the Star-Plus solution to a .NET application using C# from the original Delphi. The solution uses a proprietary database, however the development team is looking to transfer the application to SQL Server in the future due to its rich reporting features and ability to scale to meet customer demand.

“We are very excited as using C# will help support retail procedures right into our development code, which will be a huge advantage for us,” says Symmonds. “C# is a natural progression from our past Delphi and Java development experiences and enables rapid application development. We are also excited about moving to SQL as our relation database to improve our overall data management abilities.”

The decision to move to .NET resonated with Auto-Star customers such as Katz Group Canada Ltd., the Canadian operating arm of Katz Group Inc. Katz Group Inc. is one of North America’s leading drug store operators, with system sales exceeding \$6.5 billion. The company encompasses more than 1,800 drug stores in Canada and the United States, with operations that include Pharma Plus, Rexall,

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Drug Trading Company Limited (Guardian, I.D.A.) and Medicine Shoppe Canada.

"The Auto-Star solution is a great fit for our organization as it complements our decision to continue to work on the Microsoft platform," says Grant Schwartz, senior vice president, Information Technology and Office Services, Katz Group Canada Ltd., "Over the next year we are looking to invest in new platform technologies to help us better manage and monitor our infrastructure. The fact that the Auto-Star solution will fit into our IT investments is a win-win solution."

Benefits

Auto-Star's Star-Plus solution provides a solid framework in which to manage a pharmacy business. From easy-to-use features at the cash lane to complete reporting and analyzing tools, Star Plus is fully customizable and provides the tools required to reduce costs and increase efficiencies.

Keeping the Shelves Full

For many retail pharmacy outlets, managing inventory is an ongoing challenge. Forecasting and managing stock can be a headache without the right tracking tools. The Star-Plus solution has frequently received accolades and awards for its state of the

art back-office inventory control features. The system can track inventory, and help organizations predict future sales and inventory requirements. It also automatically generates orders using Electronic Data Interchange (EDI) through the supply chain, and receives back from the suppliers exactly what is being shipped to those stores, updating the purchase order system through SQL Server, which resides on Auto Star's head office application - Star Link.

"The main reason that clients purchase our system is for its inventory control capabilities. We help our clients to save hundreds of thousands of dollars in stock annually," says Symmonds. "The solution helps clients analyze what they're selling and what they aren't. Some of our customers have returned upwards of \$100,000 worth of inventory and changed their shelf space to sell what's moving, helping to double their sales."

"We use the Auto-Star solution as a perpetual inventory tool. It helps our stores to know what is in stock and when to order more," says Schwartz. "When it comes to developing in-store promotions, the tool is a great asset in helping us to manage inventory and keep our shelves stocked."

"The Star-Plus system is really an end-to-end solution to eliminate potential human error and manage the flow of information electronically."

Eliminating Human Error

Maintaining and keeping the right products stocked in the right area of a retail drug store can be a challenge. However with the Auto-Star applications, organization such as Katz Group are better able to eliminate human miscalculations and keep inventory moving. Further, with the application built into the point of sale (POS) terminals, cashiers are better able to tally their sales, and floor managers can know exactly what is in stock and when to order more product.

"The Star-Plus system is really an end-to-end solution to eliminate potential human error and manage the flow of information electronically," says Symmonds. "Our customers are able to better understand their business by having accurate data, and can compare and contrast to find how they are doing year over year."

"Star-Plus has helped us maximize our investments and provide us with a lower total cost of ownership, which is great for our business."

Lower Total Cost of Ownership

Manageability and maximizing IT investments is critical for any organization, particularly those in the fast-paced retail sector. The Star-Plus solution provides businesses with an interoperable system that integrates with their existing IT investments, helping to lower the total cost of ownership.

"We have found that many of our customers look to us to provide a solution that is compatible with their existing IT investments. The fact that the Star-Plus solution is built from the ground up with Microsoft tools, including Visual Studio and SQL Server, has been key to our success," says Symmonds. "By building the solution on the Windows platform, end users find it easy to use, familiar, and easy to integrate with other third-party adapters."

"Auto-Star has provided us with a great solution that over the years has grown with our organization," says Schwartz. "Star-Plus has helped us to maximize our investments and provide us with a lower total cost of ownership, which is great for our business."