

LOWRANCE ELECTRONICS INC.



The largest manufacturer of consumer sonar and GPS devices lets users find answers in corporate databases from their desktops.

How do you deliver information access to a \$100 million company with an MIS group of less than five? At Lowrance Electronics, they give the managers the means to fish for data themselves. The information hook tied to company PCs is MBF-UDALink (formerly DataExpress) from MB Foster.

Lowrance, the company that virtually invented sport fishing fish finders, like the Lowrance LMS-350A and Eagle Optima, has been on the cutting edge of technology for more than 40 years. At its operations in Tulsa, Oklahoma and Mexico, more than 1,000 employees design and manufacture high-powered consumer electronic devices. The company has racked up more than a dozen patents in 41 years of business. Managers at the business needed a way to hook their own answers for business questions quickly, to keep pace with the rapid cycle of manufacturing consumer goods.

Programming manager Mark Farris chose the ODBC driver of MBF-UDALink (formerly DataExpress) to draw a faster line between corporate manufacturing, the sales databases and those managers. The Tulsa operation designs and builds the printed circuit boards, and that's where the majority of ODBC users work. An HP 3000 business server runs core manufacturing software. It also hosts custom systems written to track data in customer service and support, purchasing, import/export operations, order entry and shipping, returns and payroll.

Routing that information to managers desktops used to involve traditional requests to an MIS department. Business was growing faster than head count, and Lowrance needed a way to link the information tools on the desktops with corporate data on the HP server. With almost 300 users already accessing the server, Lowrance needed to provide an intelligent link to corporate data that didn't require MIS staff time.

"You have a large number of very good tools on PCs," Farris said. "Delphi, PowerBuilder, Visual Basic, Access, Crystal Reports are all great. But those tools are anticipating you are staying with the latest trends in software, like SQL databases. To take advantage of those desktop tools, you need to be on an SQL database platform. For Lowrance to switch its manufacturing package, which our users are happy with, to that platform would cost the company in the range of \$2 million. Is it worth that investment to change, just to be changing?" Lowrance decided no. "So, we needed a way to bridge between those neat tools that you can use on the PCs and on our legacy data on the HP 3000," Farris said. "That's where MBF-UDALink (formerly

DataExpress) comes into play. It gives us the best of both worlds: a solid, sound manufacturing package that runs on the 3000, plus we can now exploit the Windows desktop through ODBC. We talk to the 3000 just like it was running Informix or Oracle."

Lowrance users linked corporate data to Microsoft Access, Cognos Impromptu at first as query tools. Since they were reading information from the HP server themselves, managers using MBF-UDALink helped a small number of the MIS staffers serve more information requests. "We would spend a large amount of our time writing ad hoc reports for one-time use," Farris said. "A manager would ask for a list of part numbers, for example, starting with 988-. Sure, a programmer can do that, but a user can too, if they are exploiting desktop products that allow sophisticated queries."

"Queries from a program such as Impromptu can be saved in Excel format," Farris said. The fluid integration between PC packages; MBF-UDALink supports more than 30 formats; gives Lowrance managers more freedom to use information for business solutions.

Lowrance mid-level managers and analysts only get the opportunity to make changes to the corporate databases from their desktops via controlled access. "If we want them to update information, we do it through an Axiant application," Farris said, referring to the PC module of Cognos' PowerHouse. The thin-client application uses HP 3000 data, and MBF-UDALink services the PC's requests for data. For example, Lowrance sales are tracked in categories, and "sometimes we will offer promotional opportunities, and we need to know the given response to a product," Farris said. "Our sales management group uses a query tool without getting MIS involved to find total quantities and dollars within a given timeframe. Just last week our managers used this capability to make a decision on whether we were getting good requests for a promotion within a given timeframe."

Farris said some training had to be delivered along with the tool, but he said "that's true regardless of the access you give your users. That education curve is going to be the same either way you go."

They really had some foresight when they put this product together," Farris said. "It makes our HP 3000 look like one gigantic SQL database."

