

UnderstandIT

From MAY DAY CONSULTING LIMITED in association with Facilitators International LLP

A publication designed to inform and enable businesses to understand the implications, costs and advantages of using Information and Communications Technology. Distributed through Chambers of Commerce.

RFID "SMART TAGS" – A CASE STUDY

In the February edition of *Understand IT*, we briefly explained a little about the technology known as RFID (Radio Frequency ID) OR "Smart Tags". To further demonstrate how this new technology can be used for innovative business advantage, the following is a case study on the implementation of RFID technology in the Aberdeen Solicitor's Property Centre (ASPC) in Aberdeen, Scotland. *[The approval of Mr John MacRae Chairman of ASPC to the content of this article is gratefully acknowledged].*

The Aberdeen Solicitor's Property Centre is located in the centre of the city of Aberdeen, and it functions on behalf of its member solicitors. It provides a central, walk-in showcase for property, both residential and commercial in the Grampian Region of Scotland.

In recent years, ASPC has been at the forefront in implementing new technology to develop its business of advertising property on behalf of its members. It has always had a web site (at least since the Internet arrived), on which are displayed all the properties on its books. However, in 2001, it launched an innovative new presence on the Internet using a graphical map-based interface, linked to its online database of properties. This radical step significantly improved the search facilities for prospective purchasers (and sellers) of property, regardless of their location. This was ideal for expatriates who were planning to relocate to Aberdeen since they could search for their new ideal home by geographic location, price band and type of property etc. and obtain significant detail about the property – all from any location in the world.

The Centre itself also underwent a significant improvement to its premises, which were considerably enlarged and re-furnished. It also introduced public access terminals within the centre, allowing members of the public to search for and print out detailed schedules of any properties in which he/she may be interested.

The use of RFID technology has been yet another step in a planned exploitation of new technology managed jointly by ASPC senior management and May Day Consulting and Interactive Information, its technology partners.

The enlarged property centre used to have hundreds of property information cards displayed on the extensive walls of the centre – grouped into areas covering geographical areas of the region, property for rent, for sale etc.

Members of the public would find a property they were interested in and then search for it on the database using the public access terminals and perhaps print out the detailed schedule if required. The use of the public access terminals of course required some keyboard skills and sometimes the equipment suffered from misuse or occasionally complete failure.

The solution was to use RFID technology alongside Touch Screens in an extremely innovative way to further improve the prime business of permitting easy search of the centre's database of properties and production of detailed schedules on demand.

Firstly, the hundreds of individual property information cards (all of which had to be prepared and printed out complete with photograph and placed in the appropriate sections of the centre) were dispensed with. In their place, twelve sets of two 20-inch touch-screens were mounted on the walls of the centre. Members of the public visiting the centre are now able to use the large touch-sensitive screens to carry out the search of the extensive database of 3,000+ properties using the many criteria offered (sale, rental, price-band, location etc.). Two pages of information are displayed – one the geographical interface with selected criteria, and on the other, the results of the search. The user then has an option to "Add to Home Card". By passing an RFID card (freely available by each set of screens) over the RFID reader their choices are added to the card. In fact, the information is not actually added to the card, but rather stored on the Centre's database server against the unique RFID card number.

Once the user has added sufficient properties to the Card they move to one of the Public Access terminals which have a printer attached and pass the Card over the RFID reader at this terminal. The properties associated with this Card are then listed and can be viewed, deleted or printed. The Cards are then taken away or left behind and every night the lists against individual cards are cleared down.

The managing director of May Day Consulting, Alan Finch believes that this interesting use of new technology makes the ASPC one of the most advanced property centre in the UK.

If you require further information or advice as to how this technology could be applied to a business problem that you have, or maybe used to improve an existing business function, then please call Alan Finch at May Day Consulting on 01224 697457 for a consultation with no obligation.

WINDOWS – MS REVERSING DIRECTION?

Have you decided to upgrade your organisation's personal computer operating system to Vista (or even XP) yet? If you haven't, and are finding the decision a difficult, not to say an expensive one, then you are not alone.

Microsoft has continuously developed and significantly enhanced its range of operating systems over the past few years. It has succeeded in producing a behemoth of a product that is not only difficult to develop efficiently, but also to maintain (in terms of the correction of its many security vulnerabilities). It also contains a plethora of features and components that users, whether they be business or home based invariably only use a small sub-set.

It is the reluctance of business managers to take the plunge and upgrade is most worrying for Microsoft. It is for this reason that many now believe Microsoft is about to reverse the trend for building an operating system that is all things to all people. It is now increasingly likely that Vista will be the last in the long line of multi-purpose operating systems.

In future, Windows will most likely consist of a relatively small core operating system and a large number of modular components. The modular approach will enable users to pick and mix the functionality actually required. Users can then easily upgrade from one version to another, without significantly impacting the cost or effort involved. It will also probably eliminate the continuous pressure on the hardware inventory – extending the realistic lifetime of an organisation's infrastructure.

This reversal of Microsoft's development methodology will probably begin to refine the modularisation process in the next version of Windows (Version 7) due out in 2010.

SPAM – STILL AN INBOX KILLER!

Despite much discussion, technical work on the part of major players in this area, and many declarations of intent to deal with the scourge of spam emails, the problem still seems to be increasing exponentially for most email users throughout the world.

A recent experiment was undertaken by McAfee - a major player in the area of spam defence. The experiment was designed to determine just how spam was affecting the average user (or potentially could do if it were not for the many defence products being used and enhanced on a daily basis). The results of the experiment have proved to be extremely alarming.

McAfee, invited 50 users, from 10 countries around the world, to continue to carry out their normal internet activities for a period of one month, but without any form of spam protection enabled on their computers.

The results indicated that the average user, without any protection, is likely to receive 70 spam emails in their inbox each day! The UK came in 5th place behind the USA, Brazil, Italy and Mexico. The 5 UK participants managed to collect a total of 5,965 spam emails. To put things into perspective, the 5 US participants had the highest number with 23,233 spam emails.

The experiment revealed a surprisingly wide spread of spammer targets. A large number involved "phishing", where an email purported to be from a reputable organisation tries to elicit sensitive information from the user. The UK appeared to be the major recipient of the "Nigerian" scam involving the offer of large rewards for helping the spammer to transfer immense sums of money abroad – sums that do not exist but relieve the unwary of large amounts in the form of administrative charges, bribes and other payments. Other categories of spam include adult services, pre-approved credit card offers, health amongst others.

The disheartening message from the experiment is that spam is probably never going to be beaten, but will just have to be managed! It is time that the sections of the IT industry responsible for providing and supporting the internet email systems got their heads together and devised a foolproof technical solution to the problem of spam. As with many other areas of technology, there are many groupings of players in this area, each of whom claim to be developing an appropriate set of technologies to resolve the problem. However, these technologies are competing with each other. Meanwhile, users continue to suffer the effects and end up losing out. It's a little like the VHS vs Betamax or Blu-ray vs HD-DVD format war, where users were the losers whilst the battle was waged. The only saving grace is that in the end, the dominant technology did go on to be extremely successful.

UNDERSTAND IT FEEDBACK

Those of us involved in writing, editing and publishing Understand IT are aware that it is widely read by its target audience – principally small business managers.

However, we are anxious to ensure that we remain relevant and provide the kind of information that is both useful and appropriate. We would therefore appreciate YOUR feedback in the form of constructive criticism and comment. Please forward any comments to info@maydayconsulting.co.uk

We wish to acknowledge with thanks that some of the material contained within this publication has been sourced from Computer Weekly, PC Pro, BBC and other reputable sources..

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Information on other Business and IT services can be found on our web site at: <http://www.maydayconsulting.co.uk> or by calling Alan Finch on 07968 262079.

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