



Home Depot Builds Customer Satisfaction with DataDirect SequeLink

Goal: Manage and integrate data across a huge distributed development environment.

Why they chose DataDirect: DataDirect SequeLink gives them one product from which they can efficiently and reliably connect to any database.

Business benefits: Allows Home Depot to quickly leverage its data assets to roll out new business systems.

Technical benefits: Depth of support for architectures, platforms, databases, and data access APIs. Centralized management console.

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David Pennington
Chief Systems Engineer,
Home Depot

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For more information, go to:
www.datadirect.com

For more information on Home Depot, go to: www.homedepot.com

Since its inception in 1979, The Home Depot has become the world's largest home improvement retailer, with over 800 stores selling a wide assortment of building, home improvement, and lawn and garden products. One reason for the chain's success is its reputation as an innovator in the home improvement industry. Equally important is its quest to offer an unprecedented level of customer service.

According to Curtis Chambers, a manager in the Infrastructure Technology Group, "We are always looking at ways to use technology to better serve our customers. Whether it's making associates more productive, providing systems that enhance follow-up with customers and vendors, or making sure we have the right products in stock. All of our information systems are geared toward ensuring that our customer service continues to be the best in the business."

Toward that end, the group has been transforming existing systems and developing innovative new ones. To accommodate this rapid growth, it is moving from traditional client/server systems to a dynamic, three-tier application server architecture. To leverage its strategic data assets in this new model, The Home Depot turned to DataDirect Technologies for a powerful data access and integration solution.

"DataDirect Technologies is our enterprise standard for data access and integration. It's all about flexibility," he explains. "We don't want to lock ourselves into any one database vendor. We want to be able to switch on the fly and not change anything. With DataDirect technology, we can efficiently and reliably connect any database using one product. DataDirect SequeLink helps us evolve with our business because of its depth of support for architectures, platforms, databases, and standards. No other product has the same power and capability that SequeLink does."

Role of Data Expands in Growing from Client/Server to CORBA

For The Home Depot, data has begun to play an increasingly important role in the enterprise value chain. As the company grows and expands, the Infrastructure Technology Group must leverage existing data and integrate information across customers, suppliers, partners and employees to deliver better service to the customer.

That focus on data is especially crucial with The Home Depot's introduction of two new business concepts. EXPO Design Centers enable customers to get expert design advice and top-quality products within unique custom showrooms. The Home Depot also operates Villager's Hardware, convenient "urban" hardware stores catering to home enhancement projects.

While these two additional brands offer the company exciting new business possibilities, they also create complex challenges for managing and integrating data. "In the past, our systems only had to support high-volume, high-transaction data. With EXPO and Villager's, it's more of a boutique experience, with an emphasis on special orders, follow-up, working with vendors and installers, and coordinating everything so the customer is satisfied," explains Chambers. "We must now integrate new types of data - from customers,

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suppliers, and service providers -as well as continue to manage our high-transaction retail data. And SequeLink is growing right along with us."

Early on, the team called on SequeLink to help centralize its data in a client/server environment. Now they also rely on the standards-based open solution to ensure a smooth transition into a CORBA-based application server architecture and the addition of new Java applications.

As The Home Depot's data access and integration needs evolve, SequeLink is helping the company stay ahead of the curve. Says Chambers, "As we build more applications, they often require the same data. One application may be character-based; another may be web-based. And the next might be a graphical, touch-screen kiosk. Whatever way people want to get data, we want to make sure we can facilitate that. Simply put, we would not be as mature of a distributed development house, with a distributed architecture and a three-tier model, it weren't for SequeLink."

Adds David Pennington, chief systems engineer, "Our EXPO and Villager's stores require different back-end processors than Home Depot. At EXPO, the cash register controllers are no longer the most important part of the store; the special-order computer is. We're finding we need different databases. In one case, it might be Informix for a Home Depot store. Next, the answer is DB2 on the mainframe for a centralized customer database. Or it may be UDB for an international store or Villager's. Whatever the need, SequeLink allows us to create three-tier applications that abstract us from the details of database vendor specifications. We can simply point our application to a different data source, and it works."

Chambers adds, "Every one of our new distributed applications uses SequeLink as its way to access and integrate data, across the board. We've built an entire thin-client Java data access framework on top of SequeLink. And it outperforms some of our native access methods in our programming languages."

SequeLink Integrates Data in Real-Time to Speed Customer Transactions

When it comes to customer service, the company believes technology should help associates get closer to customers, not stand between them. "The associate-customer interaction adds value to the Home Depot experience," explains Chambers. "We want to make sure there are as many orange aprons in the customer's view as possible. By giving associates the information they need, where they need it, we can make that possible."

By way of example, Chambers cites the SequeLink interface between third-party design packages - used to design kitchens and baths, for example - and the company's ordering system. "When an associate is with a customer, it's critical that the application and data are readily available. You want to make sure customers never feel they have to wait."

The Home Depot used SequeLink to integrate two systems, helping to provide better customer service for the design center. Before SequeLink, an associate would help a customer design a kitchen and then go to another system and retype every SKU to create the customer's order. It would take so long, that the associate would often ask the customer to come back in an hour or two.

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"With SequeLink, it's an immediate transfer of data from the design system into our Informix-based order system. So the customer can walk right up to the cash register and pay for it. That not only saves Home Depot time and money, it creates happy customers. And a happy customer is a repeat customer," Chambers emphasizes.

Mobile Ordering Streamlines Inventory and Boosts Productivity

Another example of how The Home Depot is using DataDirect to impact customer satisfaction is inventory ordering. In the past, the company relied on a manual, paper-based ordering system. Every Monday, department managers used to mark up orders on an inventory list, then hand it off to a computer operator, who would re-key information in the system.

Now The Home Depot uses a mobile inventory ordering system with a pen pad and scan gun that communicates to an Informix database using SequeLink. Department managers can now roll through the aisles and scan items. The system provides information about sales for the week and inventory on hand; it charts current sales against the same period last year; and identifies how long a vendor will take to fulfill an order. Now department managers can quickly identify and head-off out-of-stock situations. "We want to put more information at our associates' fingertips, so they can easily see the impact of their decisions," explains Chambers.

The new system streamlines the inventory and ordering process, helping the company ensure it has the right products on the shelves and in stock. "Our goal in IT is to build systems that allow associates to spend more time with customers."

New Extranet Extends Reach to Suppliers

The technology team is also extending the reach of its systems, using SequeLink to connect suppliers into the company's extranet. "Thanks to SequeLink, our suppliers can now logon to our extranet and receive their orders, rather than waiting for us to fax them every night," says Pennington. With a high volume of special orders from our EXPO stores, our suppliers were getting overwhelmed by faxes. The suppliers are now responsible for looking at their open orders and entering the time to fulfill. That lets us set realistic expectations for our customers."

Scaling for the Future

"DataDirect SequeLink has avoided a lot of headaches for us. It has been able to grow with our applications - from merely accessing data and displaying it for reporting to actually handling transactions and updating data. If you look at the systems we're building with SequeLink, they're in the stores; they're with our vendors; they're on the extranet; and they're here at headquarters. SequeLink has become a pervasive technology that we use across almost every application," summarizes Chambers.

Adds Pennington, "We regard DataDirect Technologies' products as one of the key pillars to our IT strategy. With our rapid growth in distributed application development, we need a solid data access framework on which to build. We've been a long-time partner with DataDirect Technologies, and look forward to a continued close relationship."