

Using maps to find – and know – your customer

Plugging Bing Maps into in-house and Microsoft applications has helped InfoGrow's customers – including The American Red Cross and Western Union – to understand their businesses far better than ever before.

The logo for InfoGrow, with 'Info' in orange and 'Grow' in blue.

"If a picture tells a thousand words, then a map can tell ten thousand," says Bob Sullivan, President of InfoGrow Corporation, a Microsoft Partner. He should know – InfoGrow has been building applications for over two decades using maps and mapping, making the leap from desktop-based systems to web-enabled tools. InfoGrow made the move to Microsoft in around 2003, and hasn't looked back since.

As the type of organizations InfoGrow sells to lost their middle management analyst employees, there was no way to convey messages from head office to sales associates in the field. Sullivan and his company found that mapping was the perfect communications vehicle.

As a result, many banks began using InfoGrow for its web-based proximity reporting tools to show business customers the quickest way to deposit their cash receipts. InfoGrow's solution allowed banks like Fifth-Third and SunTrust to give account managers an application that let them make reports quickly on their own, rather than sending the job to an analyst in a far-off office. InfoGrow also provides other banks, including ViewPoint Bank, with basic locators for customers looking for their nearest bank branch, ATM or mortgage office.

"An example of Bing Maps use in this case might be a bank prospecting a restaurant chain like Wendy's for their deposits," says Sullivan. "The bank's sales reps wouldn't necessarily 'get' mapping or GIS concepts, but we make it easy for them to get this information across to the customer with the minimum of fuss, providing a map and report in 15 minutes

as opposed to the days and sometimes weeks it took to complete the report in-house. In the first year we cut out 4,000 hours for that particular operation."

Through enthusiastic adoption of Bing Maps, InfoGrow has used the platform as a display vehicle for what it does – proximity mapping, Business Intelligence, CRM, and marketing automation amongst them. By incorporating Bing Maps, the end users do not need training in - or understanding of - GIS to use InfoGrow's tools. Customers currently include banks, hotel chains, print/copy companies and trucking companies.

"We host the application for the customer, so it's a very quick start," says Sullivan. "We can make changes and perform upgrades smoothly, with the minimum of disruption. It also allows internal IT at the customer to carry on doing what it does well. "

Lately, InfoGrow has made a conscious effort to move away from the operations side of its customers' businesses, and focus on integrating with CRM. The company has built a free point mapping plug-in for Dynamics CRM, including driving directions. InfoGrow continues to actively develop for Microsoft Dynamics CRM and is releasing a Sales Call Planning module to drive sales rep productivity and enhance user acceptance of CRM.

One area showing promise is commercial leasing – users of this solution include Western Union and The American Red Cross. Managing leases for organisations where there are lots of commercial leases, all with different requirements and different expiration dates, can be time-consuming and repetitive for well-paid real estate

management staff. By plugging mapping right into these leasing systems, InfoGrow can offer business intelligence, combining data from Harbor Flex, Virtual Premise and other lease management providers to ensure that customers' lease management is continually informed and can turn to an easy-to-understand resource.

The real estate management group at the American Red Cross uses InfoGrow to manage all of its commercial leases for chapter offices, disaster warehouses, biomedical stores and blood collections. It allows staff to make better decisions by permitting them to take a "What if" approach and immediately see the results.

"We're starting to see the same exciting things happening on the back of CRM," says Sullivan. He encourages users to think of CRM as a user wizard sitting on top of a powerful structured database - SQL. "We know customers are using Microsoft Dynamics to manage not only customers and prospects but facilities, equipment, and insurance claims to name just a few."

All of this helps achieve a significant end goal for InfoGrow – delivering actual, useful Business Intelligence. While the benefits of good BI are abundant and, for the most part, clearly desirable, InfoGrow argues that this intelligence is wasted if it is not distributed to the wider organisation. Bing Maps helps staff at all levels of an organization interpret data quickly and easily, and make better decisions. It also helps translate what can be quite esoteric outputs from a BI platform into chunks of information that are easy to understand.