Entertainment Company Improves Accounting and Marketing

Station Casinos uses workload automation solution to deliver smoother audits and increase customer loyalty.

Business Challenge

Station Casinos is a leader in gaming and entertainment. The company's properties feature much more than gaming options, including dining, events, shopping, and spas. With 14,000 employees and serving a broad-based clientele, the company's 18 locations offer something for almost everyone. To accurately segment their marketing efforts, the company sees technology as a competitive advantage.

Station Casinos is in a competitive industry and strives to maintain its edge by becoming more efficient and flexible wherever possible. Stations also uses its sophisticated IT infrastructure to market more effectively to its clientele in order to get the best return from its marketing budget.

In recent years, the company went through a major restructuring program. Despite the challenges of the economy, the company invested in business intelligence (BI) technology to enable better use of its extensive customer data and position itself for future growth.

The company was well aware that costly delays occur when BI data is inaccurate or unavailable for business decisions. Therefore, to make sure that the BI services consistently allow daily accounting reviews, and provide useful views of customer activities to drive marketing results, the company had to improve the underlying business processes that gather data and deliver reports.

Jeff Martin, Station Casinos' director of business intelligence, provides specific examples of the types of problems that the company wanted to solve, "We were working on accounting automation: taking different audit functions that happen individually at each of our 18 properties, consolidating the workload to a centralized accounting team, and delivering daily reports to that team. During our IT audit, we found we were doing too many things manually, from data entry to scheduling ETL processes that populate our central data warehouse."

"It was inefficient and error prone. For example, ETL would fail one day, or reports would fail another day, or processing would run long, and we didn't consistently have a guaranteed time when we could deliver the final reports to the auditors. Before finance could roll out this centralized accounting program, they needed to have that guarantee in place."

The company also wanted a comprehensive understanding of guests' preferences to target offers and strengthen loyalty between the company and its most active and profitable guests.

Martin says, "We needed a 360-degree view of a guest. For example, typically in our industry, companies will market to slot players based on what they do at the slot machine. But that same guest may be spending just as much money or more at our steakhouse, or at our spa, or at some of our different venues at the hotel. So our goal was to understand all of the different activities and services that any given guest could be interested in, know their full value to our business, not just a segment of their worth, and reward them accordingly with offers, and of course market to loyal guests more. That type of knowledge is a competitive advantage in our industry."

This type of customer view requires gathering and managing a great deal of complex, detailed data from many sources, making sure the data quality is correct, and building and delivering reports and data analysis capabilities to marketing decision makers.

> "It gave us the end-to-end solution, and compared to other tools that we were evaluating, the time to implement the schedules was significantly less with Cisco, because we didn't have to learn a custom batch language and write scripts for each job we wanted to schedule. We could literally plug into Cognos and Informatica, and see familiar GUIs to create jobs and interact with the objects that were already stored within those different environments. That was the big driver for us."
> — Jeff Martin, Director of Business Intelligence, Station Casinos.

To support these objectives, the company had to make sure that all of the data-processing jobs that comprise the extract-transfer-load (ETL) workload and populate the data warehouse executed reliably and in the proper order according to a service-level agreement (SLA) schedule.

Data integration and ETL are complex processes, with lots of interdependencies. Martin says, "We get different data feeds from hundreds of different sources that we then, through the ETL, bring into the data warehouse."

Coordinating all of these interdependent processes effectively was challenging, and required staff monitoring to prevent problems such as jobs starting too soon or not at all. The staff was spending an excessive amount of time managing this complexity, resolving issues resulting from barriers or even trying to diagnose the source of a data error.

Martin gives an example of how this inefficient ETL process management was holding up the auditing consolidation initiative, "When reports have already run and data arrives late, we had auditors wasting time looking at incomplete data. Then we had to manually rebuild the reports, wasting the BI team's time in re-running reports to get the data refreshed. About 60 percent of our time was spent manually maintaining these ETL side details, because the schedule was basically unscheduling itself. This had to be fixed so we could move forward."

These complex workload challenges were mainly due to the company not having standardized on an enterprise workload automation solution with one interface through which it could schedule and monitor all ETL jobs companywide. Instead, the company had tools with limited integration and visibility that required staff to constantly monitor processes and troubleshoot them if something went wrong.

Solution

The company chose Cisco® Tidal Enterprise Scheduler, because it can schedule any job in the company's BI environment through a single interface across their entire distributed IT landscape, and consolidate ETL processing into a single manageable solution. Martin sums up the deployment experience, "Cisco professional services and support were excellent, and we were using the product within ten days."

"Cisco's scheduler has tight integrations with both Cognos and Informatica, which is what we run. And, it can interact with our Teradata appliance. It gave us the end-to-end solution, and compared to other tools that we were evaluating, the time to implement the schedules was significantly less with Cisco, because we didn't have to learn a custom batch language and write scripts for each job we wanted to schedule. We could literally plug into Cognos and Informatica, and see familiar GUIs to create jobs and interact with the objects that were already stored within those different environments. That was the big driver for us."

The company now has a comprehensive view of all the interdependent processes that populate the data warehouse, and full monitoring and alerting to detect problems early. Those capabilities have proven to be the keys to improving Station's IT efficiency and providing timely, accurate accounting and marketing reports.

Business Results

The company is getting the results that it wanted. The auditing and marketing reports are being delivered as expected. The company is saving time by eliminating much of the manual effort required for gathering data, monitoring individual processes, and running reports, because the automation is powerful enough to coordinate those activities without user intervention.

"This solution has let us move forward with the accounting consolidation and streamlining projects, and we have centralized those resources," says Martin. "Now, instead of having many redundant resources for each property, and inconsistent manual processes, we are doing the same tasks using the automated coordination of Cisco Tidal Enterprise Scheduler. The company can operate from a single version of the truth, and we've reduced costs getting there."

Getting a better picture of the guests who visit Station properties has helped the company achieve better marketing results as well. The company captures correct information about guests' choices and is able to market specifically to individual entertainment preferences.

"Having the ability to market to guests because we can gather and process correct information about them is a very big deal. We can provide most of our guests with offers that would interest them. And, we have seen that when we market to guests, they are much more profitable than when we don't market to them."

Cisco Tidal Enterprise Scheduler saves the BI team many staff hours daily. ETL workflows run much faster and more efficiently than before, and potential errors or barriers in the workflows are flagged so that major problems are prevented. Martin says, "If something does fail or might fail, then the scheduler notifies us early in the process, so we remediate it before it has an impact to the business."

The company has even found that this solution boosts IT morale by making being on call much easier on the staff. "Before this solution, the person on call was spending 60 percent of their time dedicated to monitoring and baby-sitting the ETLs. Now they get that time back. Only if something goes wrong with a backup for example, do they get involved. This is another big win for us."

The hard work, smart use of major technologies, and overall business results demonstrated by Station Casinos' BI team has garnered several awards over the past few years. Martin says, "We recently won a TDWI [The Data Warehousing Institute] best practices award for Right Time BI. So we have received recognition both inside the company and outside the company for our BI success."

PRODUCT LIST
Cisco Tidal Enterprise Scheduler
Cisco Tidal Enterprise Adapter for Informatica
Cisco Tidal Enterprise Adapter for Cognos

Next Steps

The company is confident that these workload automation services can meet not only the ongoing demands of finance and marketing, but other business needs.

Based on the benefits demonstrated by the BI deployment, the company is exploring other areas within IT that could benefit from the Cisco solution.

Martin describes the interest and discussions taking place in the IT organization, "For example, the PC development group, and our QA department have needs for different types of scheduling. And they are also interested in the ability to plug into this enterprise scheduling infrastructure by deploying other Cisco integration adaptors."

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