

Users look to offer BI access to customers, partners

New projects aim to boost operations, say users at the Information Builders Summit 2006
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April 25, 2006 ([Computerworld](#)) -- ORLANDO -- "Business intelligence for the masses" has been an industry buzzphrase for the past several years. But several users at Information Builders Inc.'s Summit 2006 user conference here said yesterday that they are embracing the philosophy with new projects to quickly move BI reports and analysis out to front-line workers, suppliers and customers.

For example, Coty Inc. plans to purchase BI tools within the next six months to provide reports to business users in 25 countries, said David Berry, senior vice president and CIO at the New York-based cosmetics company. The reports will provide access to customer information related to sales of Coty's Calvin Klein, Jennifer Lopez and Vera Wang perfume lines and other cosmetic products.

The company is evaluating enterprise BI tools from Information Builders and Business Objects SA and will eventually standardize on tools from a single vendor to send data about credit, trade promotions and inventory levels to business users who never have had access to BI before, Berry said. Until now, BI has been for the "chosen few" employees such as controllers and analysts, he said.

Coty is extending BI to the larger group of users because it is putting in place a service-oriented architecture (SOA) to send and manage the services needed to embed BI in workers' business processes.

In January, Coty began using SOA middleware from Information Builders subsidiary iWay Software Inc. to integrate the myriad of systems it inherited through the \$800 million acquisition of Unilever Cosmetics International, a deal announced last July. "The SOA infrastructure is already there," Berry said. "It is a major piece of work and architecture you don't have to deal with when you go to BI."

Moving BI to front-line workers would have been too expensive without the SOA, he said. "You would have to bring in some very specific IT talent to do that," according to Berry. "I don't want to have a bunch of developers writing code."

For its part, Information Builders announced yesterday that it has integrated its WebFocus BI tool set with iWay's SOA Middleware to allow users to embed analytics in business processes. Linking the two will allow a user to get alerts when an order comes in that exceeds warehouse space, according to Information Builders executives. The company also touted its Active Reports tool -- which was announced in November and began shipping April 10 -- as a tool to expand BI access to new users. The tool embeds

an analytic engine in the HTML of a report in an e-mail to allow disconnected users to drill down into the report as if they were connected to a BI report server.

Since December, Air Canada has been testing a beta version of Active Reports to provide reports to its international sales force and possibly its customers, said Chantal Berthiaume, manager of marketing intelligence and information delivery at the Montreal-based airline. Before it began evaluating the tool, the company had ruled out ever providing reports to customers, she said.

“There is no way we could invest in the infrastructure,” Berthiaume said. “[Now] if we decide to give our top-tier customers monthly reports of their past travel we would just have to send them an e-mail.”

The Hillman Group Inc., which makes and distributes fasteners, screws and other small pieces of hardware, plans to go live in the third quarter of this year with a new application using geographic information systems (GIS) tools from Environmental Systems Research Institute Inc. (ESRI) combined with Information Builders’ WebFocus reporting tool. The application will allow the company to map how its products are shipped from distribution centers nationwide to ensure shipping is cost effective, said Pete Hebauf, manager of executive information services at Hillman in Cincinnati.

“That is a level of visibility we don’t have right now,” Berthiaume said.

In the fourth quarter, the company plans to go live with two additional BI projects using GIS -- one that maps sales territories and another that matches new housing starts with the sales volume by store of Hillman Group products. ESRI and Information Builders have a partnership to integrate their products.

Rich Pedott, vice president of sourcing, planning and allocation at Eastern Mountain Sports Inc. in Peterborough, N.H., said his company is testing a project that will allow customers to access BI data from a dashboard. The company last year rolled out a dashboard to provide internal users with information about operations.

“That provides you a very cheap way to do collaboration. ... You are no longer requiring your supplier or your vendor community to make an investment in something like EDI,” he said. “You can send them a dashboard that is relevant just to them and they can ... get insights and help drive your business.”

Dan Vesset, an analyst at Framingham, Mass.-based market research company IDC, said operational BI -- embedding BI in the business processes used by front-line workers -- is becoming more common as companies seek to give users better tools to make decisions. However, he and users noted that companies must pay closer attention to the user interface for these applications. A common rule of thumb is that training for business users can't exceed two hours, he said.

Robert Richards, director of application development at Carlson Hospitality Worldwide Procurement Group Inc., said the operational BI applications must be as easy as using an Internet search engine for business users. “My end users have difficulty turning on the computer, [difficulty] with the concept of double clicking on the mouse,” Richards said.

Within the past four months, Carlson completed the rollout of dashboards built with WebFocus to give its hotels access to performance measured against 12 metrics, such as how rooms are being priced to meet demand.