

CRM and enterprise storage networks

The successful deployment of CRM and e-commerce requires a well-architected data management platform that supports the entire enterprise. By Bob Leonard, marketing manager, EMC² Corporation.

Customer relationship management (CRM) systems capture and integrate all customer data from anywhere in the enterprise. CRM is a business-driven strategy aimed at optimising revenue, profitability and customer satisfaction. CRM provides a full view of each customer across lines of business, thus enabling an insurer to perform very targeted marketing: to cross-sell the most appropriate products at the most appropriate times and to adjust service levels – treating the most profitable customers with the levels of service they deserve.

Such a customer-centric business architecture needs to be matched by an IT infrastructure that puts customer information at the centre – for easier information sharing, data management and high-speed communication among diverse business systems. The cornerstone of such an infrastructure is an enterprise storage network (ESN). An ESN is a storage area network (SAN) that supports the entire enterprise – multiple platforms – mainframe, Unix and NT – both inside and outside the data centre. It also connects to LANs and WANs, file servers, web servers and management consoles. An ESN acts as middleware and sends data where it is needed, to legacy systems and to new front-ends, for instance, CRM systems, call centres and web servers.

What has slowed the adoption of CRM by insurers is the stove-piped nature of their business processes and information systems. Vertical lines of business have developed their own applications and procedures, and the systems to support them. The result is information infrastructures that have not been designed to share information and are notoriously difficult to integrate.

The successful deployment of CRM and other powerful strategies such as e-commerce require a strong and easily scalable IT infrastructure. Having a well-architected data management

platform that supports the enterprise is much more important than the tools selected to build the CRM. Often, the IT department forges ahead with a mission to 'do CRM' without rethinking the architecture of their stove-piped, multi-platform IT infrastructures. The architecture can be quickly and cost-effectively transformed to support CRM, e-commerce or any other business initiative that may arise.

Instead of a server-based peripheral that only adds to the challenge of each IT mission, an ESN provides the centralisation of business-critical information across IT systems. Through a common information environment, an ESN simplifies the task of data management and allows IT organisations to deliver on new applications and business requirements more quickly and cost-effectively.

The benefits of a CRM implementation deployed on an ESN infrastructure are significant. The costs of policy and claims processing are reduced, by providing cross-functional information sharing and data movement – users from multiple locations get fast access to data on every system connected to the ESN, regardless of physical location. The quality and timeliness of customer service is increased because every department can access the centralised information at channel speeds. The software functionality of the ESN creates non-disruptive, point-in-time copies of production data, thus allowing frequent refreshes of the CRM database.

By deploying an ESN 'infrastructure', insurers can not only integrate their legacy systems, but also their multiple distribution channels. This results in a 360-degree view of the customer across all channels. Just as CRM helps companies create a customer-centric business architecture, an enterprise storage network provides the platform for an information-centric IT infrastructure. ♦