

THE 3000 NEWS Wire

Independent Information to Maximize Your HP 3000

Holiday orders still swell 3000

Hickory Farms site puts server to work with forms

The 45-foot tractor trailers are backing up to the loading dock at Hickory Farms this month, as the mail order, Web and store retailer pushes thousands of boxes a day out for holiday gifts. The company won't need boxes of forms and labels to deliver the gifts, though. This year the company has expanded its HP 3000 use to include forms and labels management.

The story of Hickory Farms' forms management is a typical one for the business server which HP stopped selling last month. Even though the computer is off HP's price list, it still generates business like software add-ons, as companies press their servers into new duty like serving up forms.

Application Support Manager Dan Buckland manages the server, a Series 989 he upgraded last year. Buckland also invested in Minisoft's eFormz software, a combination of PC-based design client and server component that's eliminated a wide array of pre-printed paper at the company. Just two shipping labels now work at Hickory Farms, down from 44 different printed shipping labels, thanks to the HP 3000.

"That project alone paid for the product twice," Buckland said. "We've also done coupons, invoices, gift certificates, letters, refund checks and two custom forms we wrote here that use Ecometry information."

Buckland and Hickory Farms IT staff use Microsoft Word to create the pre-printed parts of those electronic forms, instead of having a print shop create the forms. The staff then brings these Word files into the eFormz Composer, Minisoft's PC client which merges an HP 3000 sample data file with the form to enable fine-tuning of the form design.

A Java routine merges the finished form and the 3000's data as a printed

report's spoolfile, sent directly to a laser printer. For example, on Hickory Farms' refund checks, the print job produces the MICR coding for the check. "You can use rules like that, or just use pass-through," Buckland said.

An easy investment

November and December are the peak months for the HP 3000 at Hickory Farms, a gift retailer who will push more than 60,000 packages per day through its systems for the holiday season.

Buckland said making the investment in the Minisoft product was an easy call.

"This product was a cheap product, compared to some of the things you buy and what we got out of it," he said. Buckland said the company made a much larger investment in improving its 3000 during 2002, when it upgraded a 4-processor Series 959 to the much-faster Series 989.

Software upgrade fees kept Hickory Farms from moving into the newest N-Class servers, Buckland said. "My hardware was just under half of the total upgrade cost. Part of it I could do as used, and I put it straight on HP maintenance," he said. He purchased his field upgrade and 3000 processor board from HP, but managed to get his other three 989 processors from the used marketplace.

Software like eFormz makes up an easier-to-approve shopping list for the kind of HP 3000 managed by growing firms like Hickory Farms. Companies are looking for ways to leverage their investment before leaving the platform. It's a strategy that MB Foster's founder Birket Foster calls "Innovate before you migrate," a path for continued business in the 3000 marketplace.

HP engaged in some innovative thinking at Hickory Farms, too. When Buckland did his 3000 system upgrade, he purchased an HP 9000 processor board for the new system from HP. The

HP service engineer approved the installation of the Unix component, he said. The decision to support Unix-based hardware in a 3000 is often tied to HP's continued support contracts for the system — another example of continued commerce around the server.

Long-term moves

The Ecometry application software at the company won't be migrated to HP's Unix this year, or even next year.

Ecometry's customers usually see their busiest seasons in the latter half of the calendar year, so they won't risk switching platforms until business ebbs.

Buckland thinks the earliest Hickory Farms might move away from the 3000 is 2005. In that off-season, the company will process 300-500 orders per day. The next Ecometry server will have an HP brand on it, whenever it goes into service, but it's unlikely to rely on Windows.

"We're just too big to do Windows here," Buckland said of his next application environment. "Ecometry is written for HP-UX. We'll start doing some research, and maybe some training, next year. Our biggest problem in conversion is going to be all the custom programs we wrote, in COBOL, Suprtool, Quiz, MPE intrinsics. You have to convert everything."

Even the migration work may generate commerce related to the 3000, as the company works to capture the business rules inside those custom programs. "I'd like to say we can do it all, because I have a very good staff," Buckland said of himself and two other developers. "But it's a horrendous task. I'd like to manage it myself, though."

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