

Seafood Retailer Nets Big Returns and Gets Closer to Customers

Aqua Star delivers superior customer experiences across offices with Cisco routers, switches, voice, and Smart Business Portal.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY
<p>AQUA STAR</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Industry: Wholesale • Location: Seattle, Washington • Number of Employees: 150
<p>CHALLENGE</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Company's growth plans depended on bringing offices online quickly while instituting greater control and consistency • Strategy to strengthen company's brand required improving responsiveness to customers • Timely access by salespeople to valuable customer information was hampered by siloed databases and unreliable connectivity
<p>NETWORK SOLUTION</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • New wide-area network with Cisco WAAS (WAN Acceleration) facilitates information access • Common LAN, wireless, and voice blueprint supports rapid start-up of new offices • Cisco Smart Business Portal provides salespeople with a roles-based, 360-degree view of customers
<p>RESULTS</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Employees have the information they need to be more productive and customer-focused • Processing time for customer orders has dropped from days to minutes

Challenge

A sea of change may be the perfect description for Aqua Star's transformation from seafood importer to a high-value retail brand in frozen seafood. Aqua Star was a well-established company with a solid track record of growth, but its management team values fresh thinking. They decided that the key to future success would be developing higher-value, high-margin prepared foods, and establishing a stronger brand for Aqua Star.

To achieve this transformation, the company recognized that it would have to have direct control or visibility across all operations, including global sourcing, R&D, marketing, sales, packaging, processing and quality assurance. It also meant that Aqua Star would have to get closer to customers in order to understand and better respond to their needs.

When Hugh Holman joined the company as Chief Information Officer, the business vision was in place but not the IT infrastructure to support it. The company had only three offices, but the plan was to start consolidating and establishing operations around the globe, including Canada, the United Kingdom, and China.

Holman had an equally strong vision for delivering a consistent customer experience across the company. Aqua Star had invested in Microsoft CRM, but adoption by the salespeople was lackluster. "The success of our new business model depended on our ability to deliver excellent customer service," says Holman. He even sat down and sketched out his dream for a desktop environment that would provide salespeople with an integrated, 360-degree view of customer information from backend databases.

“Our technology infrastructure is not just keeping up with the company’s growth. It is contributing to it.”

– Hugh H. Holman, CIO, Aqua Star

Solution

Holman began working with Network Computing Architects (NCA), a Cisco® certified partner based in Bellevue, Washington. NCA’s Chief Architect, Wayne Baylev, proposed a Unified Communications solution from Cisco to meet Holman’s requirements for fast scalability, consistency, and reliable connectivity across the company.

Previously, each office had a different phone system. Connectivity was time consuming and unpredictable. Each office maintained its own customer contact information, so there was no visibility across the company about customer interactions. NCA designed and installed Cisco Unified Communications Manager at headquarters, allowing remote offices to be on the same phone system and have capabilities such as direct extensions and four-digit dialing to anyone in the company. The new network infrastructure is composed of Cisco switches and intermediate session routers; Adaptive Security Algorithms and Cisco IOS® firewalls were deployed to provide security for the voice system and network perimeter. Cisco WLAN products were installed to provide corporate and guest wireless at each Aqua Star location. In addition, Cisco WAAS solutions were implemented to optimize application performance over the WAN.

On one occasion, NCA’s Chief Technology Officer, Don Flynn, invited Holman to see a demonstration of the Cisco Smart Business Portal, an integrated dashboard that presents a 360-degree view of customers on any Cisco Unified IP Phone or desktop device. “I literally went back to my office and grabbed my sketch of my dream desktop environment,” says Holman. “It was almost exactly what I had pictured for our salespeople. It was literally a dream come true.”

The Smart Business Portal makes it fast and easy to integrate valuable customer information from formerly siloed applications, including CRM, enterprise resource planning, web applications, and Internet content such as maps and weather. The information is not just integrated, it is role-based, so that Aqua Star can provide the sales organization with the specific types of information that they need to initiate and close sales.

“It probably would have taken us months to develop the same capability in-house,” says Holman. “We will have a capability in 2008 that I did not think we would have for at least a year or more.”

Because the Smart Business Portal is developed on .NET, Holman knew that his IT staff would be able to add content from any data source. Aqua Star has already integrated the company’s Interactive Management System (IMS). In the past, salespeople could not check inventory while on the line with the customer. They had to hang up and run multiple queries against IMS data in order to collect all of the information that they needed about orders and availability. Then they had to call the customer back.

Today, real-time inventory information is presented as a graphical web part on the Smart Business Portal. In fact, according to NCA’s Flynn, “Cisco Smart Business Portal is increasing customer satisfaction and lowering cost of operations by empowering Aqua Star personnel to service customers in real time. The need to take a message, look up information, and return the customer call is removed from the equation.”

Results

The Cisco Smart Business Portal gives salespeople an unprecedented window into what customers want, the quality of service that they receive, and the outcome of every interaction. “Now salespeople use the CRM database for every customer interaction,” says Holman. “Our customers are getting faster, more personalized service, and our salespeople are more productive and successful.”

The role-based view in the portal developed for Aqua Star enables salespeople to see open orders, sales to date, a breakdown of products sold, and inventory assigned to customers. New web parts and mash-ups can be tailored to support sales campaigns using specific criteria, such as inventory information and past due invoices.

The Cisco Smart Business Portal enhances sales productivity with “click-to-dial” outbound calling from Microsoft Outlook. Salespeople do not have to waste time looking up telephone numbers and punching in numbers to make calls. In addition, the Smart Business Portal allows salespeople to

record notes about calls right on the Smart Business Portal screen. All the information about the calls is tracked, recorded, and automatically uploaded to the CRM database. Aqua Star management has the ability to review inbound and outbound calls, providing new insights into employee productivity and individual customer value.

Future integration efforts include an instant credit status report, so salespeople do not have to call the Finance Department to check a customer’s credit history before finalizing an order. “Imagine how productive Aqua Star’s sales team will be when they can see a customer’s order history, check that against what we have in inventory to sell products or offer special deals, and then make sure the customer is in good standing before placing the order, all from one screen,” says NCA’s Flynn.

PRODUCT LIST
<p>Routing and Switching</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cisco 2821 Series Integrated Services Routers • Cisco Catalyst® 3750 Series Switches • Cisco Catalyst 3760 with Power over Ethernet <p>Security and VPN</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cisco ASA 5550 Series Adaptive Security Appliance • Cisco 2821 ISR with IPsec security <p>Voice and IP Communications</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cisco Unified Communications Manager (CallManager) • Cisco Unity® • Cisco Unified IP Phones 7971 • Cisco Smart Business Portal <p>Wireless</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cisco Aironet® <p>WAAS</p> <p>Presence Server</p> <p>Mobility Manager</p>

In addition to the benefits of the Cisco Smart Business Portal, employees are now successfully connecting to centralized resources over the new Cisco network. There are no longer any complaints about how long it takes to access information or how erratically email performs. All offices also have wireless connectivity, which Holman views as another big contributor to employee productivity. “I can see the difference in my own productivity just by being able to take my laptop and walk into any office or conference room for a meeting without having to log off and reconnect to the network.” When customers visit Aqua Star’s remote offices, they can even be given guest access to the Internet.

Aqua Star is the second largest frozen seafood brand in the United States, and the largest in Canada. “Our technology infrastructure is not just keeping up with the company’s growth, it is contributing to it,” says Holman.

Next Steps

Even as the network continues to be deployed, Aqua Star continues to add offices, including three additional locations in North America and operations in the United Kingdom and China. In countries where Aqua Star may be unable to find the vendors that it needs for cabling, the company has the ability to deploy a completely wireless environment, including Cisco IP wireless phones. "We have simplified the LAN and WAN environments substantially, which is saving us time and money as we add locations," says Holman.



Americas Headquarters
Cisco Systems, Inc.
San Jose, CA

Asia Pacific Headquarters
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