Microsoft Business Solutions Retail Management System
Customer Solution Case Study

National Recreation Area Speeds Check-ins, Rentals, and Reports for 1,500 Campsites

Overview

Country or Region: United States
Industry: Retailing

Customer Profile

Land Between The Lakes (LBL) National Recreation Area serves almost 2 million visitors yearly who pay an average of U.S.$2 each to sightsee, camp, canoe, bicycle, hike, and ride horseback.

Business Situation

LBL's internal mandate was to reduce costs yearly and employ electronic data, but manual check-ins slowed lines. Trucks couriered data to the main office where preparing data for reports took hours.

Solution

Unanimously, LBL evaluators selected US eDirect's Camp-Magic, a niche-specific enhancement to Microsoft® Business Solutions Retail Management System. Now satellite dishes transmit sales and data.

Benefits

- Compliance with administration's mandates to use electronic data
- Faster check-ins and shorter lines
- Allotment analyses for water, electricity done in minutes, not days
- Marketing by location, demographics

"...[W]e could not beat US eDirect's enhancement of Microsoft Retail Management System as the fastest, most modern, user-friendly, and most compatible solution with legacy applications."

Barry W. Haley, Business Manager, Land Between The Lakes National Recreation Area

Managing admissions, fees, rentals, and receipts for 1,500 campsites and historical, cultural, and environmental education facilities throughout 170,000 acres in the Land Between The Lakes (LBL) National Recreation Area was no fun for staff. A courier in a truck collected receipts and hauled business data from each site to LBL headquarters. An aging database faltered under the records of nearly 2 million yearly visitors. Staff spent dozens of hours a week entering and formatting data for a federal accounting system. Two independent LBL teams evaluated six solutions, and unanimously chose US eDirect's Camp-Magic, built on Microsoft® Business Solutions Retail Management System. Now check-ins are faster and rental gear is easy to track. Satellite dishes send data to headquarters. Camp-Magic slashes reporting time by automatically formatting and sending reports to the federal accounting system.

"U.S. taxpayers win because this solution is one of many LBL improvements that will help us meet self-imposed targets to drive down our budget every year while improving service delivery."

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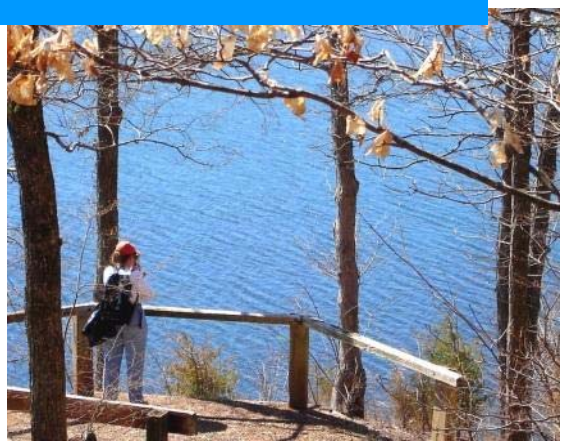
LBL provides time for solitude and group activities away from cities' cares.



Situation

Land Between The Lakes (LBL) National Recreation Area in Kentucky and Tennessee is a United States National Recreation Area covering 170,310 acres, with 300 miles of shoreline, 12 recreation destinations and more than 1,500 campsites. LBL's 302 staff serve over 1.8 million visitors annually and collect approximately U.S.$4 million for admissions, services, and products.

LBL's more than 100 types of admissions include discounts for seniors and children, day passes for varying durations, and visits to an 1850s living-history farm, a planetarium, and a nature station. Visitors can buy permits for fishing, hunting, horseback riding, and other activities. Rentals are available for bicycles and canoes, as well as complete sets of family camping equipment.

Barry W. Haley, LBL Business Manager, says "To enhance the recreational experience, our outposts allow visitors to secure items they may have forgotten. Our administrative locations offer visitors convenient places to get valuable information, permits, and admissions. And our small gift shops enable guests to take home souvenirs of their memorable times at LBL."

The Demand for Change

Campgrounds and LBL's central office were using an aging Microsoft® Access database that had once neatly managed data and reporting at the central office. However, with more than 300,000 accumulated customer records, even though compressed and cleaned faithfully, the Microsoft Access database was no longer capable of carrying the load.

In concert with the federal E-Government Initiative to identify and implement "priority actions that achieve strategic improvements in government, and set in motion a transformation of government around citizen needs," LBL needed to improve legacy processes in manual and semi-automated transactions, inventory tracking, communications, and reporting.

"We had to enhance infrastructure, overall hardware and software integration, cash management, and the timeliness and accuracy of reporting on every measured aspect of service and finances," says Haley.

Each campground managed its campsite availability on chalkboards, and a courier trucked the reservation and sales receipts data to a central office. Because some campground personnel might change from year to year, everyday mistakes did occur, errors were frequent and hard to track down. The computer system did not accept credit cards, which had to be handled separately or, at some sites, not at all. Business procedures strayed from LBL standard processes, as some sites evolved practices to fit local needs and resources.

When the LBL central accounting department wanted records, sites had to copy their Microsoft Access database and route it to the requesting party through the courier, who collected receipts. Each outlying database then had to be installed at the central office. Twice a week, staff at the central accounting offices would manually consolidate the data and create reports using Microsoft Access.

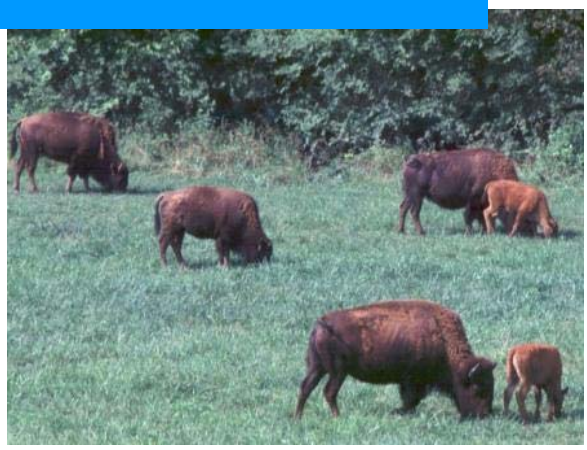
Challenges

As the quantity of customer records increased, LBL's difficulties grew in checking in campsite arrivals and checking out purchases and rentals, as well as tracking and reporting transactions, managing inventory of sales and rental items, and ensuring wise stock purchases.

"At the central LBL administrative office, there has been a significant drop in staff hours spent on data consolidation, reporting, and accounting. Managers now know where each dollar came from."

Barry W. Haley, Business Manager, Land Between The Lakes National Recreation Area

Bison thrive in the 750-acre prairie restored to its native state of 200 years ago.



Some solutions were clear: Already under tight watch, cash and credit card data would benefit from automation and more traceable reporting. And because the vast majority of LBL staff are retired volunteers with little or no previous computer experience, any new automation needed to be logical, consistent, and easy to learn.

Timeliness of reports and response to changing business situations suffered because remote locations communicated by handing Zip disks of recent transactions to the courier who logged 15,000 miles a year, just in picking up cash. This physical aspect of data collection could produce significant lags between outlying sites' activities and production of central-office reports. This diminished the value of the report data to indicate changes in business activities or to provide assistance to different campsites on a timely basis.

A new system would need to address and remedy these operational challenges, then consolidate transaction data from all outlets into a format compatible with corporate data requirements, while implementing federal policies into the system. It would also need to provide many specifically formatted reports to the United States Department of Agriculture's accounting and IT system, the Foundation Financial Information System (FFIS).

As LBL has been designated a National Demonstration Area to showcase and exemplify sound business practices, change was mandatory.

Solution

To fully comply with federal purchasing standards, open competition for a new system was advertised in Commerce Business Daily. Six responses were deemed technically qualified. "We had requested a tremendous amount of detail," says Haley, "because we have to 'know before we go.'"

Submissions were examined by a technical review team and a cost review team. Although neither team knew the other's findings, both unanimously picked the solution based on Microsoft Business Solutions Retail Management System.

The View from the Top Down

The solution was presented by Microsoft Certified Business Solutions Partner US eDirect, whose Camp-Magic product enhances and specializes Microsoft Retail Management System. Camp-Magic provides large and multi-site campground automation.

The Camp-Magic solution was installed in 12 remote locations covering two states during winter and spring of 2004–2005. System enhancements are ongoing.

Camp-Magic presents a customer interface and capabilities tailored to the camping recreation industry. It includes a flexible reservation system; rentals; permitting and ticketing, thorough retail management; and highly flexible standard and custom reports. Employing a common look and feel in all its functions, Camp-Magic relies upon Microsoft Retail Management System as its foundation. This Microsoft product helps retailers manage inventory, receiving, transactions, customer records, and purchasing.

Hiking the Information Trail

Now, at LBL points of sale, more than 100 staff members can log in arrivals, rent equipment, sell goods, sell use permits, and verify credit card transactions using an automated system that collects and totals data in real time. If staff want to know the whereabouts of a certain canoe, they can easily see who rented it and when it's due

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Barry W. Haley, Business Manager, Land Between The Lakes National Recreation Area

Elk share the restored prairie with bison and provide memorable stories for tall tales back home.

back. Beyond campground transactions, the system is utilized in day-use facilities, and sites that sell maps. It helps in other areas, such as identifying and flagging customers whose checks have been returned.

Each LBL public facility now has from one to five touch-screen registers that reside in gatehouses, equipment-rental shacks, and other points of public interaction. Within each site, data from registers travels by a local area network to a main on-site computer. Satellite uplinks connect these computers to LBL's Internet service provider.

Each site uploads sales and usage reports to the Microsoft Retail Management System Headquarters server housed at US eDirect, while price changes and other mandates arrive at each LBL site by the same route. Microsoft Retail Management System Headquarters is the over-arching software solution that resides centrally and manages multiple outlying retail installations. Credit-card requests and authorizations use PCCharge to access payment processors through the same communications routing.

Staff at the main LBL administration building use Terminal Services, found in the Microsoft Windows Server™ 2003 operating system (part of Microsoft Windows Server System™ integrated server software) and Remote Desktop software in Microsoft Windows® XP Professional to log on to the reporting server. Microsoft Retail Management System Headquarters is in US eDirect's labs, where knowledgeable staff instantly perform any support or troubleshooting.

To interface with FFIS, US eDirect designed and implemented an interface that sends information in correctly formatted files and reports.

Benefits

The Microsoft-based solution from US eDirect is now an integral part of LBL's efforts to speed up and ease processes, as well as make data more accurate, while aligning customer and financial data with government accounting procedures.

Haley comments, "LBL management and staff exemplify this administration's thrust to use electronic data for smart management decisions and to serve the public better. This new automation enables us to maintain financial and customer data that, in turn, helps us run our facilities more efficiently."

Clarity and Accuracy

"U.S. taxpayers win because this solution is one of many LBL improvements that will help us meet self-imposed targets to drive down our budget every year while improving service delivery. Compared to previous manual methods, wherever we now interface with the public, we have dramatically expedited and clarified our transactions," says Haley.

One example of saving staff time is the system's Phone-Number Lookup feature. At check-in, the system checks the visitor's phone number to see if the guest has visited earlier. If so, screens are automatically filled in. If there hasn't been a previous visit, the system searches Internet listings for the individual's phone number. If it finds a match, the operator verifies it with the visitor; then, the system populates appropriate fields.

Automation also resolves the ambiguity of illegibly written reservation notes and sales tickets. "Every new accuracy enhances cash accountability," says Haley."

Demographic Data Helps Serve Public

Haley notes, "Through Microsoft Retail Management System and Camp-Magic, we

“Through Microsoft Retail Management System and Camp-Magic, we know which campsites are most popular, which demographic segments of visitors use them, and during what seasons.”

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Tomorrow, these visitors can return the complete campsite setup that LBL rented them, and drive home unencumbered.

know which campsites are most popular, which demographic segments of visitors use them, and during what seasons. One example of using that data is our recent analyses and decisions about which facilities should get the next electricity and water service upgrades. Without this system, we’d have taken many more staff hours to perform a serious study and to manually compile the best data we could. But today, simply by running a series of reports in a few minutes, we can prove and document that we are placing those funds where they’ll do our publics the most good."

Knowledge of visitor demographics helps LBL management better plan services and offerings to match the needs of each market segment, during the right seasons, at the right locations. Sites can be staffed according to anticipated customer activity.

Wiser Marketing with Targeted Reports

Knowing demographic data on visitors also helps LBL communicate more effectively. LBL can learn where various demographic market segments come from, who has children or dogs, who goes fishing versus hiking, and how much each segment spends. Thanks to this system, LBL knows who visits the recreation area, where they come from, how long they stay, what they do while they’re visiting, and how much they spend.

Reports Haley, “We can tailor promotions for stronger coverage in cities and demographics that we think should know more about us. Then we can bull’s-eye our ads and literature to present an enticing package—so more people pack up their cars and come here. We know seniors are more prevalent in spring and fall, but families with kids come during summer. We target our advertising to the right media to get our share of each market segment in the appropriate seasons.”

Haley points out that—except for adjusting staffing per visitor census—many fixed operating costs remain nearly flat with or without visitors. So each new visitor, well-served and returning often, can help defray expenses for years to come.

Benefits at the Top

“At the central LBL administrative office,” says Haley, “there has been a significant drop in staff hours spent on data consolidation, reporting, and accounting. Managers now know where each dollar came from. They know what products to buy to ensure best levels of service and most efficient capitalization of inventory. They can compare income and expenses by category, and project future expenses.”

Predefined enterprise reports are particularly useful during the many performance-indicator meetings. “The system gives us graphs that let us compare our targets, last year’s numbers, and this year’s attainment figures for our top 10 key performance indicators,” says Haley. “We see these indicators by specific locations, by groups—such as all campgrounds or all day-use facilities—or by LBL as a whole.”

Haley says that, even though the new solution is deployed in every location that seems feasible, LBL is continually evaluating system improvements to reduce cost and raise levels of service.

“We could implement a public-facing Web-based ticket and reservation capability so visitors can make reservations and buy admissions from home. We are beginning to explore campground kiosks for self-serve check-in. If a person can make airplane reservations from home, then check in on a computer-based kiosk at the airport, then board the flight, there’s no reason we can’t ultimately implement those same efficiencies,” says Haley.

For More Information

For more information about Microsoft products and services, call the Microsoft Sales Information Center at (800) 426-9400. In Canada, call the Microsoft Canada Information Centre at (877) 568-2495. Customers who are deaf or hard-of-hearing can reach Microsoft text telephone (TTY/TDD) services at (800) 892-5234 in the United States or (905) 568-9641 in Canada. Outside the 50 United States and Canada, please contact your local Microsoft subsidiary. To access information using the World Wide Web, go to: www.microsoft.com

For more information about US eDirect products and services, call (866) 935-4653 or visit the Web site at: www.usedirect.com

For more information about Land Between The Lakes National Recreation Area products and services, call (270) 924-2000 or visit the Web site at: www.lbl.org

Reviewing Wise Choices

Haley praised US eDirect because, "Tony [Alex] and his team don't even blink at going beyond the call of duty. They originate ideas and implement them, often at their own expense. They understand and contribute to our mission, which is what makes them a valuable partner."

Haley summarizes, "After extensive comparative analysis and months of use, we could not beat US eDirect's enhancement of Microsoft Retail Management System as the fastest, most modern, user-friendly, and most compatible solution with legacy applications."

Microsoft Business Solutions Retail Management System

Microsoft Business Solutions Retail Management System offers a complete store automation solution for small and medium-sized retailers, streamlining point-of-sale (POS), customer service, and store inventory management, and providing real-time access to key business metrics. Microsoft Retail Management System is a comprehensive solution for single-store and multi-store retailers that empowers independent proprietors, store managers, and cashiers through affordable and easy-to-use automation. Microsoft Retail Management System has the flexibility and scalability to grow with a retailer's business. It works with the Microsoft Office System, Microsoft Windows Small Business Server, and leading financial applications to provide end-to-end support from the cash register to the back office.

For more information about Microsoft Retail Management System, go to: www.microsoft.com/pos

Software and Services

- Microsoft Windows Server 2003
- Microsoft Windows XP Professional SP2
- Microsoft SQL Server™ 2000
- Microsoft Business Solutions Retail Management System
- Microsoft Office Professional Edition 2003

Hardware

- Dell PowerEdge 2600 server
- Dell OptiPlex PCs (2.6 GHz)
- APG cash drawers
- Metrologic Voyager barcode scanner
- MagTek magnetic stripe reader
- SonicWALL TZ 170 wireless routers

Partner

- US eDirect

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