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GDSX: Better Midoffice Mousetrap?

By Jay Campbell

AUGUST 02, 2004 -- Several regional corporate travel agencies are rolling out quality control technology from a new company whose leadership and technological approach are held in high regard. This week, travel technology guru Jon Farrier returns to what he did as a founder of what is now TRX Inc., armed with a new generation of technology and an alternative business model.

Plano, Texas-based GDSX, of which Farrier became CEO yesterday, is on display at the National Business Travel Association convention this week in Orlando. Ex-TRXers Becky and Bill Strahan founded GDSX nearly three years ago because "we've always wanted to create a better midoffice quality control product," said Becky Strahan, president, COO and sole owner of the company.

The new system, known as Compleat, has been running in 16 European countries at more than 500 TQ3 Travel Solutions offices. Until December, Farrier served as CIO of Europe, Middle East and Africa for TQ3, which held exclusive rights to Compleat until last summer.

So far in North America, GDSX has replaced Trondent Development Corp. as provider of pre-trip data to Hi-Mark Software, which Farrier had selected to be TQ3's data reporting provider in Europe.

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Adelman Travel of Milwaukee and Uniglobe Western Canada have selected Compleat to replace TRX's CoRRe software, for which TRX has reduced support as it markets the Correx service bureau. Campbell Travel in Dallas and Chicago's Tower Travel Management also are GDSX clients.

Quality control software is used for such functions as ensuring reservations are formatted properly, checking for lower fares and watching for seat availability, upgrades or waitlist clearance. When customized, such tools allow agencies and corporate accounts to monitor virtually any information in global distribution system passenger name records. Accelerating such tools also creates opportunities for customer relationship management.

GDSX is offering what it calls a customizable and efficient travel fulfillment software system built on Microsoft's .NET platform and using the Visual Basic programming language. Users said Compleat allows them to customize routines or rules to quality check PNR data for such functions as policy compliance, without having to request that their provider make the change. Clients can access the software in Windows terminal services, but GDSX also provides a graphical user interface for creating routines, requiring less technical expertise.

Compleat makes substantial use of structured data connections with the GDS, frequently allowing it to import PNR data once rather than scraping the GDS screen several times—which generates "hits" to the GDS and additional costs for agencies.

GDSX currently connects with Amadeus, Galileo and Sabre in structured data—known also as Web services, using XML—and now is developing similar connections to the Apollo and Worldspan systems.

"They are the only vendor talking to multiple GDSs in a structured format," said Adelman Travel Group technology solutions manager Ivan Imana. "Our corporate PNRs tend to be

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250 to 300 lines in Sabre, containing information about client contracts, etc. In TRX's CoRRe, just to read that information would take four or five hits, which is substantial in this new world where we're paying for GDS resources. In a structured format, I can get it all in one hit."

Adelman signed a contract with GDSX in May, after a year-long search that also considered Aqua Software Products, which recently was absorbed by Navigant International and no longer will market to new agency clients, and Cornerstone Information Systems, which is developing the next generation of its QC software. Imana said Adelman hopes to completely convert to Compleat by mid-September.

Keith Donner, agency development manager for automation systems at Uniglobe Travel Western Canada, also scoped out Aqua and Cornerstone after TRX said it no longer would make modifications to the CoRRe system to which Uniglobe held a license.

"Compleat is where they all should be," said Donner, who eventually will offer Compleat to all Uniglobe agencies in Canada and the United States. "I can't say you can't do this on Aqua or Cornerstone, but the sheer speed and intuitive design are impressive—and the company is small, hungry and brilliant."

On his second day of training on Compleat, Donner built a routine for checking and grabbing upgrades on Air Canada.

"This is identical to the current TRX model except that we program and own our own routines, but still run it on their equipment as fast as we want," said Donner, who estimated the technology would reduce GDS hits by 70 percent. "We'll keep our old systems until November. Without support from TRX on CoRRe, we can't adjust if the GDS makes changes to the PNR."

"One of the most compelling features is the multi-GDS capability," said Tower Travel Management president John Smith. "All

these QC systems search fares, but they are all hooked into one GDS, so you have a license to the Sabre or the Apollo version and if you have another GDS, you have to replicate that. With Compleat, we can take a PNR booked in Sabre and run a multi-GDS fare check every day."

Tower this week will go live on "a majority" of the system.

Since they employ screen scraping, most quality control systems had to be rewritten when the structures of PNRs change—when airlines implemented codeshares and availability displays were adjusted, for example. Screen capture software had to be rewritten to know where to find certain information.

"If you're screen scraping, you're counting rows and sizing over and saying 'this should be here,' " Imana said. "If the GDS changes something, you're in a tailspin."

Depending on how widely used it is in a given piece of software, structured data does away with many of those challenges. "Everyone has to move to a more open structure, using Web services and XML, and a more flexible platform that can run on lower-cost hardware and have greater throughput," said Norm Rose, president of Travel Technology Consulting. "In the midoffice, GDSX is using structured data, but they do have some screen scraping."

"Screen scraping is always an inferior technology," said Loren Brown, CIO at Carlson Wagonlit Travel, a global client of Aqua Software Products' Aqua Platinum QC tool. "We intend to talk to GDSX."

CWT is developing a contingency plan as a result of Navigant's decision to stop selling Aqua to new agencies, but Brown said he was assured by Navigant's management that the Aqua products would continue to be supported and, in fact, would be bolstered by the reallocation of sales and marketing dollars to development. CWT is one year into a multi-year Aqua contract, but its acquisition of Maritz Corporate Travel also

gave it a relationship with TRX.

"We're still reviewing all the technology between TQ3 and Navigant," said Navigant treasurer, CFO and COO Bob Griffith, referring to the integration of Navigant International and TQ3 as part of their recently announced joint venture. "Aqua is stitched into our entire structure, just like Compleat is stitched into theirs, but we're not going to sit back and let Aqua stagnate before we complete this review."

Asked about Navigant's Aqua decision and also the departure of sales and client services executive vice president Steve Reynolds from TRX, Becky Strahan said, "We do benefit from the timing of those things, but anyway our customers are looking to be in control of their software while also leaving the databases and the hardware up to us."

While Navigant executives said the market for the quality control products offered by Aqua is "shrinking," both Strahan and Cornerstone president Mat Orrego disagreed. "I consider it a growing and expanding market," said Orrego, who noted that Cornerstone will launch a QC product, iCQX, in September built on the .NET platform.

"I'm glad GDSX is in play and driving some competition for us because competition breeds excellence," said Orrego, noting that iCQX will offer a local interface as well as integration with its iBank data reporting software. "You want to allow people to define and own their own process in rules and routines from a variety of locations, whether headquarters, branch or at the customer level." Orrego said Cornerstone's current tool, ResQ SX, has about 400 customers.

Some observers said that converting their quality control systems to the use of structured data rather than screen scraping could be expensive for existing players. Still, Rose said, "I'd be surprised if TRX did not recognize that's the way to move."

TRX officials were not available last week to comment.

Starting from scratch clearly gives GDSX an edge. "It's always about whatever is the best, proven technology available at the time you're doing something," said Hi-Mark president Kevin Austin. "You go with what will give you the most flexibility and the biggest return on your efforts. What GDSX has going for it is that it's the newest kid on the block, so that allows them to invest in the newest technology."

"It's one-upsmanship," said Corporate Solutions Group partner Thom Nulty. "You certainly cannot underestimate Jon Farrier, who is probably one of the smartest guys this industry has ever seen, but Navigant and WorldTravel and the others will find reasons to say it's not superior. They won't sit back and rest on their laurels, and they have all continued to advance their products over the years."

During some of those years, Farrier was bound by a non-compete clause he agreed to with TRX after his time as president of its Travel Technologies Group predecessor. He did some consulting before joining TQ3 ([BTNonline, Dec. 7, 2001](#)). Because of the complexity of Europe's travel technology infrastructure, said Farrier, "I needed an automation platform that was enormously configurable, and I wanted to learn from the shortcomings of the systems I had at TRX. When CoRRé became a service bureau, that created distance between the user and the provider, and we found clients would do other, ridiculous things to get jobs done.

"It's always amazed me that travel management companies would outsource their very essence," Farrier continued. "Commoditizing travel fulfillment is a terrible idea."

Tower's Smith sees Compleat as a key component in his agency's marketing message about using all channels. He said that while Compleat's handling of the basics of midoffice technology—such as seat

management, waitlist clearance, document delivery and e-ticket tracking—make it worth considering, "the CRM possibilities are endless."

The industry has implemented plenty of technology that replaces human interaction for basic functions. It has struggled to use information that affects a detailed recollection of traveler preferences.



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