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Editor's View

What Makes an Application Great?

Great applications don't have to be about great things.

By Tamar E. Granor, Editor

Through the years, we've run a number of articles in FoxPro Advisor about exciting FoxPro applications. Often, what makes those applications stand out is where they're used. The poster child for FoxPro and Visual FoxPro for years has been JFast, the application created by Brian Jones' group at Oak Ridge National Laboratories and the University of Tennessee, used to arrange logistics for the Desert Storm and later troop and materiel movements. (See the June '98 issue.) In fact, Brian demonstrated the latest version of JFast at DevCon '99 to the usual chorus of ooh's and aah's.

However, an application doesn't have to be about something big to be worthy of notice and this year's winners of the Visual FoxPro Excellence Awards did a good job of pointing that out. Their areas of coverage are managing data for a general contractor; preparing shipping documents and tracking international cargo; implementing sales, marketing and customer services applications; and monitoring compliance with environmental regulations. None of those are fields that immediately catch your attention and make you want to hear more, but the winner's demos dazzled (as did the demos of several other finalists).

What separates a good application from a great application is the way it makes the user feel. All of this year's winners provide their users with a lot of information in as natural a way as possible. Because some of the contexts for these apps are complex, natural might not mean easy, of course; these aren't necessarily applications you pull out of the box and start using without any training.

Construx LLC's The Contractor's Office, winner for the Best Web Site Solution, is designed to keep everyone involved in a construction job up-to-date: the general contractor's employees and subcontractors, the architect, and the client. Instead of using couriers and playing phone tag to the max, everyone has access to necessary documents online. The result: reduced data entry, better reporting and happier clients. This is a good example of using the web to create a virtual private network that increases productivity without the expense of creating a real network.

Talon from Eagle USA AirFreight, winner for Best Client-Server Solution, manages the international portion of Eagle's shipping business. Like contracting, the freight business involves lots of paperwork and coordination. International shipping has added challenges, including the need to handle multiple languages and currencies. The Eagle team solved those problems and a host of others by taking advantage of VFP's OOP capabilities. They built a number of interface classes that let forms throughout the application share a similar look-and-feel. If you know how to work with one part of Talon, you have a big head start in working with the next part. No fools, the Eagle team also took advantage of existing tools including some ActiveX controls and Steven Black's

INTL Toolkit, which they used to handle their internationalization issues. Using third-party tools where appropriate was another common theme among the finalists. Don't build what you can buy.

Visual Elk from the Great Elk Company, the winner for Best Packaged Application, is an unusual piece of software. It's more of a framework than an application. It's designed for companies to implement their own sales and marketing applications. To that end, it has a great deal of flexibility built in. Watching the Great Elk representatives demo it was fascinating because they were trying to show a particular implementation of their package, but at the same time explain how it could have been done many other ways. The interface is based on Microsoft Outlook, but within that structure, the company using Visual Elk can make many different choices. This application is a testament to VFP's flexibility.

The required reporting for the Coast Guard support unit that handles environmental regulations for Alaska and the Arctic is the kind of stuff that gives bureaucrats nightmares and gives the Jack Andersons of the world fodder for column after column. The Excellence Awards winner for Best Desktop/Network Solution, Unit Environmental Compliance System (UEC) from Environment Management Systems, Inc. and Dash Point Software, Inc., though, is a case of US tax dollars well spent. The application, which includes 15 modules that handle different aspects of the reporting, more than paid for itself immediately by eliminating fines for non-compliance and reducing the time needed to provide the required reports. One report that previously took a month to prepare now takes several hours. No one wants to deal with this stuff, but with UEC, it's now relatively painless.

I could go on, talking about the finalists that didn't win and some of the other entries, but the point is clear. It isn't what the application is about that makes it interesting (though that can be exciting). It's what you do with it. Anything can be a great app if you make it one. Find out what the users really need and what they really want and make your next app great.