



On-demand strategy: Improve customer service to remain competitive in the global economy

By Hannah C. Bower
January 1, 2006

COMMERCIAL, RETAIL : MANAGEMENT, SALES, SOFTWARE

Like many industries in today's global business environment, competitors in the domestic glass market have felt the pinch of overseas manufacturing. With lower labor costs, overseas manufacturers can produce more for significantly less. As a result, the price of glass has been driven down, leaving many suppliers struggling to survive.

How do companies based in the United States, such as General Glass International, stand a chance? By shifting the battleground from price and product to business process transformation, namely customer service, sales and supply chain responsiveness.

Based in Secaucus, N.J., GGI fabricates and distributes flat-glass products from window and picture-frame glass to specialty architectural glass. In its fourth generation of family ownership, the company was founded more than a century ago by Max Balik, who learned his trade in Austria's glass industry before immigrating to New York City.

The company has 150 employees and operations that span the globe in an expansive network of manufacturers, fabricators, distributors, architects and specifiers, or engineers that specify materials for building projects. GGI purchases raw glass from manufacturers and sells to distributors and fabricators who tailor it for windows, shower doors and other high-end interior applications. Additionally, GGI does its own cutting and fabrication of glass. The company stores products in its domestic warehouses and sells to a market consisting of approximately 600 distributors and fabricators who sell the glass to product manufacturers and to approximately 25,000 glazing contractors.

Shifting competitive strategy

David Balik, GGI president and chief executive officer, knew the key to remaining competitive in the global economy would require more than competitive pricing and product adjustments. He knew executives needed to focus on process refinement throughout its sales, production and customer-interfacing operations to help reduce time to market.

To do this, sales representatives and buyers need real-time access to product specifications and company profiles to provide better customer service and make more informed buying decisions. Throughout the production cycle, GGI employees must keep a close watch on inventory to ensure that products ship. With more than 15 percent of its workforce traveling at any given time, GGI managers needed to enable remote employees to access business data and effectively manage the end-to-end sales and production process.

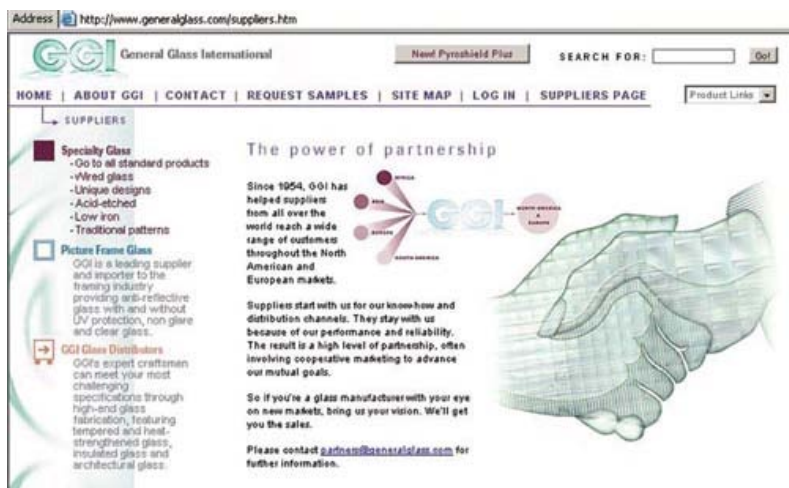
"To be agile in our industry and keep product flowing through the supply chain and out to the distributors, it was essential that we enable our business systems with access to the World Wide Web," Balik says.

Balik turned to Tri-Bry of Hoboken, N.J., www.tribry.com, an IBM business partner that had been implementing IBM iSeries systems into GGI's infrastructure. With more than 25 years of positive IBM experience, GGI and Tri-Bry focused on remote salesforce connectivity to give the GGI sales team remote access to corporate data.

Filter By

- Topic
- Date Posted
- Type
- Issue
- How Tos

go



GGI's core business information resides on an IBM eServer iSeries in its New Jersey facility. Previously, sales representatives traveling throughout the United States and overseas had to log in to the company's virtual private network, often requiring them to configure whatever personal computer they were using. These configuration issues, combined with unreliable Internet service in remote sales regions, meant that sales reps on the road could not count on access to corporate data. One sales representative in Europe solved the problem by carrying an entire filing cabinet with him, containing reams of paper with customer contact, sales history and credit information.

To provide remote employees with information on demand and reliable Internet access, GGI workers needed to eliminate their need to connect through the company's virtual private network. Tri-Bry officials turned to the IBM WebSphere Application Server Express. Tailor-made to meet the e-business needs of small to medium-sized businesses, remote workers could now access any software residing on the corporate server using WebSphere. The cost for purchasing WebSphere and setting it up for remote users was approximately \$7,000. "Full-sized application servers are overkill for a small company like GGI," Balik says. "But with WebSphere Application Server Express, we have the right tool for the job."

Officials at GGI also worked with Tri-Bry consultants to build a portal that gives employees encrypted access to corporate information using an Internet browser on any device at any location—a PC at their customers' offices, an Internet café, or even a cell phone.

Using the IBM solution, GGI's salesforce members and buyers log onto any Internet browser to access their company's inventory, order status, credit management, general ledger, accounts payable and shipping applications. For instance, a buyer visiting a remanufacturing plant in Shanghai might log onto the inventory system to determine the current inventory level of a product to help in forecasting the need three months ahead. He or she might access the shipping system to communicate to the plant manager how long it will take for a shipment of raw glass to reach Shanghai so that the production line can be set up in time.

"I take about seven trips a year to China alone, and the WebSphere solution has made an enormous difference in terms of convenience," Balik says. "Before, I had to get someone on the phone, or send a fax and wait for an answer. Now, when I travel, I have as much information at my disposal as I would have if I were in the office."

The portal has delivered noticeable improvements in communication and response time between employees at GGI headquarters and those traveling. Based on employees' increased efficiency, Balik expects to increase business volume during the next few years without adding to its administrative overhead.

Improved customer service

Another area GGI identified for transformation was the way employees handled product sample requests. The specialty-glass business caters to a network of glazing contractors, specifiers and architects who frequently request samples to see the product before making a selection.

When GGI's managers analyzed how employees handled requests for glass samples during the past two years, they realized they had spent more than \$100,000 only on shipping costs. Moreover, they discovered that some people ordered multiple copies of samples that went

undocumented. The company did not have an automated process for tracking the frequency of these prospective customers' requests.

To better track sample requests and control costs, Tri-Bry officials built a site that features a sample ordering page and product-specification page. The specification page shows images of GGI's 50 types of specialty glass, specifications and current inventory status in real time.

The specification fields are updated constantly on the iSeries and displayed on the Internet automatically. Contact information gathered on the sample request page is fed automatically to the company's contact-management system. This lets GGI incorporate sample requesters into its sales and marketing program, supporting the strategy to increase its presence in the specialty-glass market.

Leverage existing technology

Tri-Bry's consultants crafted these solutions using GGI's existing information technology investments and extending them into more modern uses. The solutions tap into business information GGI already had and repurposed it to make employees more efficient and responsive to marketplace changes. Through these investments, GGI employees transferred their historic customer-service focus into electronic business processes that benefit customers, and ultimately, GGI's bottom line.

"We are acquiring customers at a much faster rate," Balik says. "Our salespeople can focus on companies that have demonstrated an interest in us, a far more promising approach in terms of adding to our customer base. As a result, GGI has become a stronger competitor in the global market."



On-demand strategy: Improve customer service to remain competitive in the global economy

By Hannah C. Bower
January 1, 2006

COMMERCIAL, RETAIL : MANAGEMENT, SALES, SOFTWARE

Company Profile

General Glass International

Fabricates and distributes flat-glass products from window and picture-frame glass to specialty architectural glass.

Owners:

David, Carol and Richard Balik

Top managers:

Ron Vance, vice president of finance and general manager of fabrication; Amnon Spievak, vice president of overseas sourcing; Randy Coones; vice president of advanced architectural glass

Locations:

Secaucus, N.J., Rockingham, N.C.; Tijuana, Mexico; Manchester, England

Employees:

150

Annual sales:

Approximately \$40 million

Connections:

101 Venture Way, Secaucus, N.J.; 07094, 201/553-1850; 800/431-2042;

sales@generalglass.com

;

www.generalglass.com

Filter By

Topic
Date Posted
Type
Issue
How Tos

go

The author is a publicist for Ketchum Public Relations in Atlanta and IBM is a client of Ketchum, 404/247-1123, hannahbower@bellsouth.net.



▪ [Commercial](#) ▪ [Retail](#) ▪ [Auto](#) ▪ [Fabrication](#)

▪ [Suppliers Guide](#) ▪ [Job Center](#) ▪ [Resources](#) ▪ [Subscribe](#) ▪ [Advertise](#) ▪ [About < li>](#)  [RSS](#)

©2008 National Glass Association. All Rights Reserved.  Powered by [Phase2 Technology](#).