

Microsoft Office System Customer Solution Case Study



Radio-Research Firm Reduces Production Time and Costs with Presentation Solution

Overview

Country or Region: United States
Industry: Media and entertainment

Customer Profile

Headquartered in Annapolis, Maryland, Research Director, Inc. (RDI) analyzes and presents audience research for more than 200 radio stations in the top radio markets in the United States.

Business Situation

RDI needed to reduce the amount of time required to produce and customize large, complex radio-audience data presentations for its customers.

Solution

The company engaged Microsoft® Gold Certified Partner PSC Group, LLC to develop a new system for producing data presentations using Microsoft Office PowerPoint® 2007 and Open XML Formats.

Benefits

- Faster production
- Reduced costs
- Market differentiation
- Efficient development

“We’re going to save at least a full-time person. By using Open XML, we’re going to save two-thirds on labor that we would have needed ..., not to mention the extra equipment we would have had to buy.”

Marc Greenspan, Partner, Research Director, Inc.

Research Director, Inc. (RDI), one of the largest radio-research consulting firms in the United States, produces large, complex presentations that provide radio-audience data for its customers once every quarter. Faced with demands to respond to more data and drastically increase its presentation output to almost four times as many presentations and more than three times as often, the company needed to update its processes to significantly reduce the amount of time required to produce each presentation. RDI engaged Microsoft® Gold Certified Partner PSC Group, LLC to develop a new system for compiling and producing the data presentations using Microsoft Office PowerPoint® 2007 and Open XML Formats. With its new document generation solution, RDI can produce more presentations in less time, while reducing costs and offering more services to more customers.



It's all in the way we listen.



“We were able to improve the application performance so drastically by not having to automate PowerPoint, because it’s not involved until the user actually opens the file. We couldn’t have done that without Open XML.”

John Head, Director of Enterprise Collaboration, PSC Group, LLC

Situation

One of the largest radio-research consulting firms in the United States, Research Director, Inc. (RDI) provides ratings analysis for the radio-broadcast industry. Founded in 1991 and headquartered in Annapolis, Maryland, RDI analyzes, interprets, and presents audience research for more than 200 radio stations, including stations in 21 of the top 25 radio markets in the United States. With 12 full-time employees, RDI generates annual revenue of almost U.S.\$1.5 million.

One of the primary services that RDI offers its customers is the compilation, analysis, and presentation of radio-audience data collected by the media research firm Arbitron. To help sell advertising and other services, radio stations use these data presentations to demonstrate ratings, market position, and demographics.

The Arbitron sampling data, recorded manually in logs called “diaries,” was released four times a year for 50 to 75 radio stations in 300 U.S. radio markets. For more than 10 years, RDI used an application built with Microsoft® Office Access® database software, the Microsoft Visual Basic® 6.0 development system, and Lotus Freelance Graphics to compile the Arbitron data and present it in slide decks.

The presentations are extremely complex, consisting of more than 400 slides, including multiple charts and graphs with 30 data points or more. In a process called application automation, RDI would use its application to import the Arbitron data into Office Access tables, and then generate the charts and graphs in Lotus Freelance Graphics.

The company had to dedicate a processor for each presentation and a full-time staff person to manually monitor the processors.

Arbitron released its data once a quarter over a three-week period, and RDI needed every minute of that time to produce the presentations.

“I called it plate-spinning,” says Marc Greenspan, Partner at Research Director, Inc., referring to the circus trick of keeping plates spinning atop multiple poles. “Somebody had to go from computer to computer, keeping them going, monitoring all the stopping points and prompts throughout the whole process.”

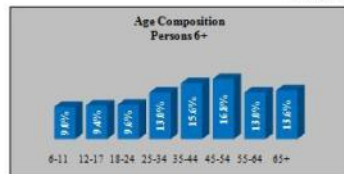
In 2008, Arbitron changed its process for collecting audience data, delivering data for more radio stations, and instead of releasing the data over a three-week period once every quarter, it delivers new audience data over a three-day period 13 times a year.

Arbitron’s increased efficiency presented RDI with a challenge. RDI recognized that it would have to update its processes to meet these new demands. With 13 required deliveries a year, RDI did not have enough days on the calendar to complete the task using its existing system.

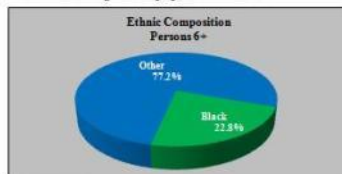
“Taking three weeks to process the data was no longer an option,” says Greenspan. “By the time we’d be done, the next set of data would be coming in, and the presentations would be close to useless to our customers. We needed a scalable, sustainable production system, and our motivation was literally business survival.”

The company needed a solution that would significantly reduce the amount of time required to produce the data presentations. It wanted to eliminate manual processes and reduce presentation turnaround from weeks to days. It needed a system that could process large amounts of data and present it in formats that RDI could easily

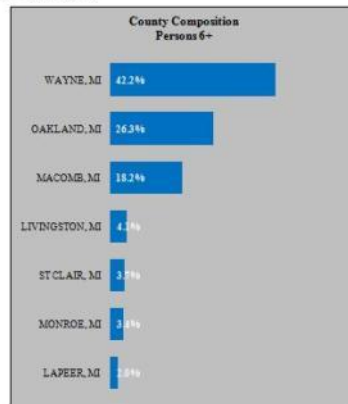
Market Profile



22.6% of the population are between 18 and 34.
45.4% of the population are between 25 and 54.
The median age of the population is 40.8.



77.2% of the population are Other.
22.8% of the population are Black.



68.5% of the population live in WAYNE, MI; and OAKLAND, MI.

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Source: Arbitron, Detroit February 2009

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Figure 1. RDI uses Microsoft Office PowerPoint 2007 and Open XML Formats to create data presentations that include complex charts and graphs with multiple data points.

customize for each of its customers. And if it could, RDI wanted to adopt a solution that would reduce costs and provide more time for staff to develop and deliver new services for its customers.

Solution

In 2008, RDI engaged Microsoft Gold Certified Partner PSC Group, LLC, based in Schaumburg, Illinois, to develop a new system for compiling the Arbitron data and producing the data presentations. PSC developed an entirely new solution, replacing the previous application automation process with a system it calls document generation, which uses the Microsoft Office PowerPoint® 2007 presentation graphics program and Open XML Formats to produce the presentations.

Open XML Formats are ISO-standard XML files, the standard data storage format for applications in the Microsoft Office 2007 suites. By using files based on Open XML, developers can more easily produce flexible

and extensible applications that manipulate, integrate, and present data.

PSC developed the document generation system using Microsoft SQL Server® 2005 data management software with a Web-based user interface built on the Microsoft Visual Studio® 2008 Professional Edition development system and the Microsoft Visual C#® development tool. The system uses Open XML Formats to create the charts and graphs and automatically produce the Office PowerPoint 2007 slide decks (Figure 1).

With document generation, users no longer have to load the data into Office Access 2007 files and build each chart, graph, and slide individually. Instead, using Open XML, the system generates the Office PowerPoint 2007 files from the data in SQL Server 2005 without having to launch Office PowerPoint 2007. This conserves application resources and significantly increases system performance.

RDI develops slide templates that can be quickly customized with customer logos, colors, and themes, and then merged with the data in Open XML to create the Office PowerPoint 2007 presentation on a server. The system then notifies the user that the presentation is available for review. Using the new system, RDI can significantly reduce the time it takes to produce a data presentation. "We were able to improve the application performance so drastically by not having to automate PowerPoint, because it's not involved until the user actually opens the file," says John Head, Director of Enterprise Collaboration at PSC Group, LLC. "We couldn't have done that without Open XML. We couldn't support document generation on the server with binary formats. It was too hard and it didn't always work. Open XML changed that."

“Before, if I doubled the number of reports, I’d have to double the number of computers and double the amount of time. By building a scalable solution with Open XML, we can expand our service without creating extra costs.”

Marc Greenspan, Partner, Research Director, Inc.

Because Open XML makes it easier for users to access and manipulate the underlying XML of a 2007 Microsoft Office file, PSC developers can find and repair issues in less time. If one slide in a presentation is corrupted, it does not affect the entire document.

Benefits

By developing a document generation solution using Open XML Formats and Office PowerPoint 2007, RDI can produce more data presentations in less time, while reducing costs and offering more services to more customers. And by taking advantage of development efficiencies, the company will save more money and time as it expands the project into other parts of the organization.

Faster Production

Having to produce data presentations more than once a month instead of once every three months, RDI could no longer afford several weeks to complete the process. Using its new document generation solution, the company can now produce fully customized Office PowerPoint 2007 slide decks from Arbitron data in just 10 minutes, instead of the hours it took to produce them with the previous application automation process.

In fact, RDI can develop presentations that incorporate more data for more radio stations in just 24 hours from the time the audience data is available.

“We will receive the data at noon on Tuesdays, and we can now have all those reports processed, ready to go, and sitting in our client’s e-mail boxes at noon and one second on Wednesday,” says Greenspan. “That’s a deadline we would never have been able to meet with our old system. With the new system, we can better

meet our customers’ needs in terms of turnaround time, and it makes our service more valuable.”

Reduced Costs

Because the new system is so much faster and automates many previously manual processes, RDI can develop the data presentations without having to dedicate a full-time staff person to manually monitor the process. The company will even be able to move some permanent staff members from the project to other priorities, such as interactions with customers.

“We’re going to save at least a full-time person,” says Greenspan. “By using Open XML, we’re going to save two-thirds on labor that we would have needed to handle so many clients in the new three-day delivery window, not to mention the extra equipment we would have had to buy.”

Market Differentiation

RDI anticipates that it will enhance its market position using the new system. By taking advantage of the flexibility of Open XML, the company will be able to add new customers to the system quickly and easily, without having to modify the document generation application. All the company will have to do is add the radio station’s logo and themes to the slide templates, and it will be able to provide customized data presentations for the new customer.

“Before, if I doubled the number of reports, I’d have to double the number of computers and double the amount of time,” says Greenspan. “By building a scalable solution with Open XML, we can expand our service without creating extra costs.”

Efficient Development

By using Open XML to develop the document generation solution, PSC created

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benefits for itself as well as its customer. First, it will be able to market similar solutions to existing and new customers. And because it can develop the system directly in Open XML without having to automate Office PowerPoint 2007, it will be much easier to maintain the system based on an open standard.

"The system won't be tied to the version of PowerPoint a customer is using," says Rick Parham, Manager of Microsoft Development at PSC Group, LLC. "I expect we'll reduce maintenance costs by 90 percent because we won't have to update the application each time Microsoft releases a new version of PowerPoint."

Because PSC developers can access and modify specific parts of files in Open XML, RDI will experience development savings as the project moves forward. "If a future deliverable needs information that we've already created for a PowerPoint file, we'll be able to get to that data directly and reuse those components," says Parham.

Microsoft Office System

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