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> case study

CENTERPOST GIVES WINGS TO .NET ALERTS AT UNITED AIRLINES

By Paula Rooney

While Microsoft's .Net platform has been slow to take off, one service provider is using its .Net Alerts offerings to help United Airlines customers get off the ground more efficiently.

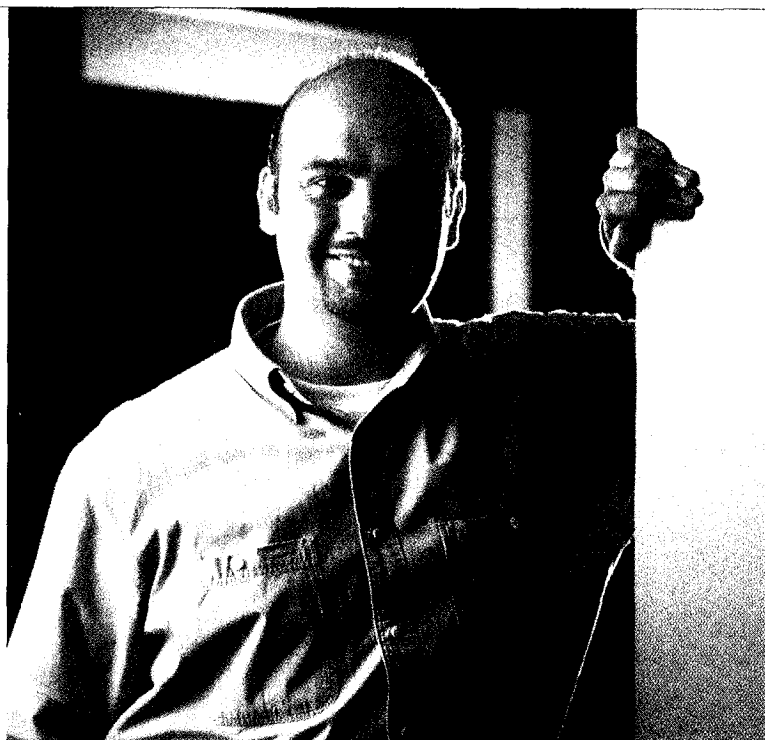
In May, Chicago-based service provider Centerpost plugged Microsoft's .Net Alerts instant notification service into United's Web site so the airline could send instant updates about gate changes, delays and flight cancellations in realtime to hundreds of thousands of frequent fliers.

"We already had outbound voice mail, fax, wireless and e-mail for United's EasyUpdate [service]," said John Fairley, vice president of engineering at Centerpost. "United wanted to reach out to customers via multiple channels, and the .Net Alerts service delivers messages via instant messaging and e-mail, and to any wireless device. Getting this information timely to customers is huge."

The end user—in this case, the frequent flier—can access EasyUpdate at www.united.com and select which Travel Alerts should be sent to their Windows or MSN Messenger accounts or to their corporate or personal e-mail accounts. Users can receive those messages on their PCs or on wireless devices such as cell phones, PDAs or pagers.

Current Travel Alerts on the EasyUpdate service include information about flight arrivals and departures, cancellations, rebookings and seat upgrades.

Centerpost built the solution using Microsoft's .Net Alerts Software Development Kit (SDK) and Passport authentication service. Although it took the service provider only two months to develop the solution, it's provided a big payoff right out of the gate, Fairley said, adding that the integration was fairly easy.



John Fairley, vice president of engineering at Centerpost, is shown here. Centerpost is a leading provider of travel services, including flight information, hotel reservations and car rentals.

One Microsoft executive noted that Centerpost's implementation of .Net Alerts is a good illustration of the changing delivery model for software from packaged good to distributed Web service.

That deployment also demonstrates how multiple service partners—in this case, Centerpost and Microsoft—can collaborate in realtime to deploy a turnkey solution.

In the United installation, Centerpost's communication service sits between the customer and vendor, automatically passing off the subscriber's data to Microsoft's data center in Silicon Valley. Microsoft, the platform service provider, handles subscriber authentication through Passport and then performs the intelligent routing of travel updates according to user-specified criteria.

"We sell the infrastructure to help them build solutions," said Adam Sohn, a product manager for the Platform Strategy Group at Microsoft. "An XML blob comes to a server hosted by Microsoft, and we've got the end user subscribers. We handle the routing logic so United doesn't have to worry about how the customer wants to be reached."

The service also requires Microsoft Passport in addition to Windows Messenger, MSN Messenger or MSN Mobile Service, Sohn said.

While end users don't pay for the service, corporate customers pay Microsoft a monthly fee for a fixed number of alerts each month. Solution and service providers can also harness the offering for use on their own services platforms, sources said.

Since the .Net Alerts service was first launched in October 2001, Microsoft has signed up more than 30 service providers, Sohn said. Other services that Microsoft operates under the .Net umbrella include .Net Passport, Microsoft MapPoint and MSN Messenger Connect.

Ultimately, Microsoft will deploy its .Net services in pure XML form to enable partners and customers to implement them in solutions with little or no custom integration required, Sohn said.

anatomy of a solution

- COMPANY: Centerpost
- FOCUS: Interactive communications technology
- PROBLEM & SOLUTION: United Airlines wanted to enhance its communications with customers. Centerpost integrated Microsoft's .Net Alerts with the airline's Travel Alerts service so that frequent fliers could receive flight information via instant messages and wireless devices.
- PRODUCTS & SERVICES USED: Microsoft's .Net Alerts SDK and Passport authentication service
- LESSONS LEARNED:
 - > A little effort can go a long way in enhancing a valuable service.
 - > Partnerships are often good ways to deploy turnkey solutions.
 - > The delivery model for software is an evolving one—from packaged product to distributed Web service.