Macro Scheduler User Podcast Interview: Gary DalSanto, Inventive Software Designs Part II

Interview by Tracy Fitzpatrick

FITZPATRICK: Hi. It's Tracy Fitzpatrick with MJT Net. Welcome to our consultant spotlight podcast series. In this series we are showcasing consultancies that are successfully using Macro Scheduler to solve problems not only for their customers, but also for MJT Net's clients. With me today is Gary DalSanto, the owner of Inventive Software Designs from Akron, Ohio. Gary - thank you for joining in today to share your story.

DALSANTO: Hi, Tracy. It's a pleasure to be here today.

FITZPATRICK: So, Gary, I have interviewed you once before and I've heard about several instances where you've been able to use Macro Scheduler, but there is one in particular that sticks out for me and that was the work that you did for a the college bookstore. I'm rooting for the bookstores now, because I'm watching them being gobbled up by the Amazon.com's of the world, and I have an appreciation for the small guys as well as for books. So, can you tell us a little bit about how you helped them stay competitive?

DALSANTO: Sure. Well, one of my recent clients was an off-campus University bookstore. And I first went into the bookstore and observed their whole process of ordering books for a semester because the turnaround time for the bookstore is... this happens every semester, they gotta' start over. And a lot of classes they use the same books, they don't use the same books, or they get a new book, they get a new edition, and you have to be on top of it quickly to get the turnaround and have the books in there for when the students come in. So the main process for them was, to actually get, after analyzing it, they would actually get a physical piece of paper, a course request from the professor with class information such as the course number, the section, the book title, and the actual book ISBN, which is like a unique number that identifies the book in the book industry. The ISBN is like a fingerprint.

FITZPATRICK: Right, yeah, yeah.

DALSANTO: So, when this information is received, the store would have an employee enter all this course information into the corporate mainframe system for that store and each store would keep track of the books through this main frame system and they would enter in the class, the class department, the section... all the stuff that was on the course request from the professor plus the ISBN.

FITZPATRICK: Which is really kind of only valuable for a semester.

DALSANTO: Right.

FITZPATRICK: Right? So, wow. It seems like a lot of work, but OK.

DALSANTO: Then, they would also, before they finished entering the record into the corporate main frame system, they would have to go out to the University website, and for each one of these courses, go out and see what the class size was of the class, and the… get some professor information. Like his email address and that type of stuff. And they would enter that into the mainframe system also. The class size, that number is so important because knowing the class size, the manager can determine how many books to order.

FITZPATRICK: Right, sure. Do a little pre-planning.

DALSANTO: So if the class is 100 kids, they aren't going to order 100 books because you know there are multiple bookstores. You're going to order less. So by knowing that class size, once they have all this information in for the sections of each class – the manager can then decide how many books to order based on the number of students taking a specific class with that specific ISBN. So you might have 20 sections using the same book. So what you would need to do is take every one of those sections, add up how many students are in there, and figure out how many books you want to order with that ISBN. Does that make sense?

FITZPATRICK: Yes, yeah.

DALSANTO: So, so the problem, though, is the process was very slow since there was over 5,000 course offerings each semester. And it's all dependent on getting the course requests from each professor with accurate information, which is completely dependent on each professor, you know. You know, you can barely read half of their handwriting.

FITZPATRICK: Right. And getting it – I would think they would have other things they would want to do sometimes.

DALSANTO: Right. So based on this process, I determined that we could cut down a huge part of the manual effort by applying some automation to their current process. So first thing I did was, I went out and created a screen scrape program with Macro Scheduler to go out and scrape the complete course catalogs that was available on the college University website. And we would run this just once a semester and the items it would scrape would be the same things that were coming across on the course request sheets.

DALSANTO: The course department, the section, the professor name, his email, get the class size, the book title, the author, the edition – It's all the information that we needed to make a decision on what to order. So once all this information was scraped, I imported it into an Access database that developed for them.

FITZPATRICK: So was the database… it was new for them?

DALSANTO: Right.

FITZPATRICK: Right? So, fantastic.

DALSANTO: So it was an Access database that I developed so they could keep track of all this data. So everything was in there except one piece of information – the ISBN number. So, because that is never on the website, because if that was on the website, people would go to Amazon with that ISBN and get it cheaper.

So we now had all this information for over 5,000 courses for the upcoming semester catalogued in a searchable database. So this eliminated the need for the bookstore employee to go out to the website and research this information for every single course request that came in. So this ended up being a huge time saver. So after building on what we had, adding a few forms to this searchable database system, we now had an Access… what we ended up doing was, is when the course request came in all the employee had to do was perform a quick search of the department, course and section on the PC's number pad and it hit enter, and which would bring up the professor's class with all the information and all the employee did at that point was enter in the 10-digit ISBN. And then go to the next entry. So taking a stack of course requests that used to take 3 days for someone to enter, per week – they would get a stack every week – this could now be entered in the course entry database in a matter of a couple hours.

FITZPATRICK: Wow.

DALSANTO: So again, it was a timesaver.

FITZPATRICK: Yeah, I would think it's a huge timesaver in a couple of different ways. You know, the obvious that you just stated, but it also, I would think, would help them get a hold of those books faster.

DALSANTO: Right, right. Well, and that's where, I went…the next step… once we had this information, ok, it's all now, once we had the course requests and they were all entered into the database, I wrote another automation script that was kicked off during off hours to enter any of these newly entered course requests into the corporate main frame system. Now this is what that employee originally did. They did the web search, and they had the course request and entered it all in. So now it entered all this information we previously scraped from the class catalog with the added ISBN number. So the script would enter items like course, department, section, class size, professor and ISBN into the mainframe system and through the use of the automation, the course requests were now entered with more accurate information, because we have the correct class sizes, instead of being gathered… a lot of times you know, instead of going to the website and getting the correct class size, you just guessed if you didn't have enough time to do it all.

FITZPATRICK: Based on maybe what you had last time, or …

DALSANTO: Right, right. So, so.

FITZPATRICK: But the last thing you want are books sitting on your shelves that are going to be…

DALSANTO: Right, right. So you have it entered in with more accurate information and since the current scrape data was from the University website, it's as current as it's going to get. So this also saves the store manager resources to use more efficiently in other areas of the bookstore such as doing customer service and selling books. So instead of doing all this data entry, they're doing what they really needed to be doing – was helping customers find things and finding their book. So the biggest advantage of all this for the manager was that once the automation was complete, the managers could quickly put in their orders to their book warehouses early in the ordering process to allow them to start filling these requests with used book titles. That's big because if you get these used book titles first – all these bookstores are going for the same titles...

FITZPATRICK: Sure.

DALSANTO: …and if you can get these used book titles before the others, before they're all snatched up, your profit margin is drastically different. A profit margin on a used book could be 100% versus only 25% on a brand new book. So it really…

FITZPATRICK: and when you're talking about college books, that's a significant amount of money.

DALSANTO: Exactly. So, so getting those course requests in there and getting the maximum amount of used books in basically has allowed them for their profit to jump way up. So, by having this…

FITZPATRICK: And when the students know too, it's like they know they can go there and get those books, they are going to keep going back. If the process is clean… there's nothing worse than -- I can remember one college bookstore that I would go to, and it would seem like they never had them, so I just stopped going.

DALSANTO: Right, right.

FITZPATRICK: So once you know that that store usually has your used book, you'll continue to go back even if they might not at one time, but you know that three out of four times they did…

DALSANTO: Right, right, and then what I did was develop some reports in the access database that allow the managers to see what classes they haven't received the course request on. And if you have all the professor's emails, they can send out an email to the professors to see if they're using a book or not, or since they have all the other sections from the course request, they can make an educated guess that they're going to be using the same book, use their class size, and then go out and order the book.

FITZPATRICK: Yeah, I think what you just said there that was key, was *educated* guess, rather than just guessing.

DALSANTO: Exactly.

FITZPATRICK: Because of that database that you built, now they have some education behind their guess.

DALSANTO: Right. So to summarize it all up, by automating all these processes for them over the course of less than a year, the store turned a profit for the first time in the history of the store. And the manager didn't have to work an excessive number of overtime hours, you know, putting all this information into the system, and you know, so, so it was a win-win situation for them and it allowed them to spend, like I said, more time with customer service and actually selling the books versus doing all the order entry.

FITZPATRICK: Right. Well, that's fantastic. So by doing so, can you quantify... what did that end up meaning for that small store?

DALSANTO: Well they ended up selling roughly 2 and a half million dollars of sales. And they ended up, they bonused for the first time in the history of the store. So they all got bonuses.

FITZPATRICK: That's a lot of money for a bookstore.

DALSANTO: That's a lot of money because...

FITZPATRICK: I mean it's a lot of money for anyone, don't get me wrong. But especially for a bookstore, I would think that's a pretty penny. That's great.

DALSANTO: Well, with the way the economy is and with Amazon.com, it's just, the big thing where they cut is resources.

FITZPATRICK: I was going to say, you usually see the same three or four people working those stores.

DALSANTO: Right. But instead of three and four, it's one and two now. And they have to do the same amount of work with little resources. With less resources. So, so basically, you know, they ended up increasing their profits, increasing their sales, with less employees. So...

FITZPATRICK: And now they have a database!

DALSANTO: That's right. And it basically has a history from semester to semester – they can see what they've ordered, and where their holds were, and constantly keep improving.

FITZPATRICK: Wow, that's fantastic. Gary, thank you so much for your time and for sharing your story.

DALSANTO: Thanks Tracy. It's been a pleasure.

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