



## ► A Letter to the Editor: **There's Lots More to Data Access than SQL**

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Is there merit in the assertions Atex Chief Technology Officer Peter Marsh makes about database management systems (DBMS) for newspapers (*Newspapers & Technology*, July 2008)? I think what he says is just plain wrong. Those who have a deep understanding of computing technology already know this. The issue is how to explain what's wrong with what he suggests without presenting a three-hour lecture in computer science.

What's his point? By using Oracle and/or Microsoft SQL Server, Atex has made a critical, correct software development platform choice for building its systems.

I don't buy it. Are you convinced that the number of job seekers on Careerbuilder.com with Oracle or Microsoft credentials is relevant? While it's true that having a DBMS makes building systems easier, there's nothing sacred about Oracle's or Microsoft's offerings. In fact, a resume peppered with commercial product certification buzzwords should be given little consideration.

Should the goal of a publisher be to have well-qualified Oracle developers on staff? Perhaps employing those who know how to put out newspapers is more to the point. Is employing those with trade school certifications relevant? I don't think so. In fact, I believe that newspaper systems are at their best when newspaper data centers operate in the dark, that is, lights out without a heavy contingent of technology specialists.

So is Marsh's message about DBMS choices for people like me? Technology decision makers in the ever-shrinking newspaper vendor community?

We don't need his help with such choices. I think he follows bad reasoning with bad choices. Commercial proprietary relational DBMS (RDBMS) systems are built for handling a large volume of small transactions. It's what they're designed for; it's

what they do well. Marsh even says so. Are there applications that call for such support within newspapers? Sure, circulation and newsprint inventory are two areas where what Oracle and Microsoft have to offer wouldn't be detrimental, but no newspaper that I know of has "many thousands of transactions per minute" needs in newsprint inventory or circulation. Are you expecting 100,000 subscribers to call at once? If so, who will man the thousands of ringing phones?

Are all newspaper applications like this? What about the big, long transactions required to support creative services (i.e., display ad production)? Do you need row locking for a display ad? I think not. What about the fail-over and recovery facilities newspaper systems must have to be reliable? I'm not sure my customers want to wait for a recovery involving a database restore and a transaction replay while on a deadline.

And is a RDBMS even worth considering for information retrieval (search)? Google doesn't use one; neither does Yahoo. And what about computer-aided design? Do Adobe InDesign or QuarkXPress have at their heart Oracle or MS SQL? I think not.

Anyone who would think such tools would support better, faster and more reliable artificial intelligence applications like automatic display ad dummyming and classified pagination is technologically naive.

So if Oracle or MS SQL would help with some applications, why not use them? Could the fact that their use locks a vendor into a costly platform be a deterrent? Why doesn't Marsh suggest open-source solutions like MySQL and PostgreSQL? Choices like that easily reduce the total cost of ownership of newspaper applications by one-third.

Microsoft virtually drools at the prospect of selling advertising. Why would you send money to a company with revenues larger than the entire newspaper business that wants to eat your lunch? And, who in their right mind would consider any

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software from Microsoft robust, highly scalable, secure and fully available 24/7? The best you can say for Microsoft software is that it can be good enough.

I like that Marsh quotes the Transaction Processing Council (TPC). Isn't it wonderful that Oracle leads the 3-plus terabyte database race? And where would you find a 3-plus terabyte database? Say you had 100,000 subscribers with a 3 terabyte circulation database. That would convert to 300MB of information per subscriber. How silly is that! No newspaper I know of needs a 3 terabyte transaction-oriented relational database, and our customers include nine of the top 25 newspapers by circulation in the U.S.

What about query facilities? Part of the reason to get a RDBM is to disentangle queries from the

specifics of a database engine. Crystal Reports accesses RDBMs with the ODBC connectivity nearly all RDBMs provide. What Microsoft and Oracle offer aren't distinguishing advantages.

Actually, if you want fast analytics, you probably want a separate data warehouse using not SQL but MDX queries.

Is the way to select technology to pick a hammer and go looking for nails? Sorry, much of the world's fasteners are screws, bolts, glue and the like. And much of what newspapers "need" in the applications they select has little to do with DBMS selection.

I found it hard to agree with anything in Mr. Marsh's article.