With one of the most recognizable brands in the entertainment industry, it may be surprising to learn that TV Guide Magazine is a relatively small company with only about 120 employees, eight of which are dedicated to IT. But size can be deceiving, and TV Guide Magazine’s dynamic operations require a broad enterprise application footprint befitting a much larger organization.

In a shuffling of ownership regimes, TV Guide Magazine was purchased in December of 2008 by a private equity firm. Based on the transition agreement, TV Guide Magazine was required to stand on its own across all operations in less than three months, a non-negotiable “hardstop” in late February of 2009. Compounding the challenge from an IT perspective, employees had long benefited from a robust Oracle enterprise applications infrastructure purchased by a prior ownership company, which was about to be ripped out of their hands. TV Guide Magazine needed to setup a new IT and financial operating platform and the budget was squeaky tight. But going backwards—losing capabilities—was not an option.

A Chorus of Squeaky Wheels

Mark Fernberg, TV Guide Magazine’s Chief Financial Officer, had considerable experience with Oracle under previous ownerships. By the time he took the financial reigns of the spun off company, he was a veteran Oracle applications user, including a lead role in the original implementation of the existing system.

Given the complexity of the project, some were skeptical that TV Guide Magazine’s Finance team, along with the company’s new and understaffed IT department, could implement a similar ERP platform within the required timeframe on its limited budget. “Most people expect overruns on a project of this magnitude,” comments Fernberg. “We knew that as a stand-alone company under private equity ownership, any cost overruns would be scrutinized.”

But those same experiences were Fernberg’s ace in the hole. He relied heavily on an internal project manager with extensive experience from the previous implementation. “She acted as a liaison between IT and Finance and knew the score right from the beginning. Because of the short timeline and the limited budget, Finance was hands-on and methodical with our oversight.”
First Things First

“The first order of business was to look at potential software solutions, including Oracle,” says Fernberg. “We knew it was going to be a tough implementation and that everyone involved would have to grind through it. My project manager and Controller put all the vendors through the paces, leaving no stone unturned.” When the Oracle team learned of TV Guide Magazine’s need for speed they immediately brought in an Oracle Accelerate solution provider, BizTech. The Oracle Certified Partner had plenty of experience in rapid implementations.

“BizTech’s experience was appealing to us right from the start,” says Fernberg. “We knew that choosing Oracle was going to require getting a larger budget than initially anticipated. There were lower cost alternatives but, at the same time, Oracle was the best system.”

Once the Oracle decision was approved, the project plan had to come together fast. TV Guide Magazine’s new data center was in the process of being set up so Fernberg, on BizTech’s advice, chose to outsource the hosting of the Oracle applications and related infrastructure.

“In the beginning as the new stand-alone IT group was being built, we considered bringing in specific resources to manage Oracle,” says Fernberg. “But as we went through some early iterations we starting wondering how this would play out. Are we going to be able to troubleshoot the more challenging technical issues, particularly during the difficult transition phase while we’re still in the process of building up the IT department? We realized quickly that a little outsourcing—at least in the short term—would be a good thing.”

Weighing Options While the Clock is Ticking

TV Guide Magazine did not have much time to focus on process reengineering. But as a stand-alone company that was no longer part of a large organization, they looked for opportunities to simplify and streamline operations. BizTech used Oracle Business Accelerators to get TV Guide Magazine in Conference Room Pilot (CRP) so that the project team was working on the software within a matter of days. These rapid implementation tools reflect industry-leading practices gathered by Oracle via thousands of implementations to midsize businesses.

The project scope quickly took shape. In some areas, existing processes were simplified. “Our previous owners developed a very complex requisitioning process that was highly customized,” says Fernberg. “As a small company we realized we didn’t have to make it so complicated. In CRP we looked at Oracle’s basic system for approvals and found it to be plenty adequate for our needs. This decision saved us incremental project costs and time.”

The new Oracle solution also had to talk to other systems. For example, TV Guide Magazine uses a sophisticated business intelligence tool for circulation and financial planning which is interfaced to the core Oracle financial management application. This greatly facilitates financial reporting, planning and cash management processes.

“It was truly a process of deciding where to incorporate inherited processes and tools with the new system’s capabilities,” says Fernberg. “Every decision was based on how we could get from point A to point B while maintaining existing functionality to the extent possible without disrupting our core business operations. These decisions were made in a timely and efficient manner because of the capabilities within Oracle and the expertise of the combined BizTech and TV Guide Magazine project team.”
Rating Success

The project was completed on time in about two months. When Fernberg looks back, he’s both proud of the team and appreciative of the fact that the project was completed in advance of the project’s aggressive deadline.

“I don’t think we could have done this in 60 days with any other solution,” says Fernberg. “It wasn’t easy but it was made easier because we had good people on all sides.”

Fernberg’s overall goal for the project sounds simple. “From an end user perspective, we wanted the transition to be as seamless as possible. “We delivered the project on time and we are operating just as we did before the transition.” TV Guide Magazine’s back office team is located in Radnor, Pennsylvania while most of their internal clients—planning, sales, editorial and circulation—work out of the New York office. “The business operators didn’t feel the weight of this transition because of all the work the project team did behind the scenes.”

TV Guide Magazine’s new parent company is opportunistic. Fernberg expects acquisitions to be integrated to the new Oracle information technology platform. He knows that his team has the expertise to bring new companies on board and that the Oracle solution can scale to whatever level is necessary.

“There haven’t been any major issues that have cropped up since we went live,” Fernberg says. Oracle has been largely out of sight, out of mind. Given how challenging this project was to everyone, I think that’s a pretty big compliment.”

ABOUT ORACLE ACCELERATE

Oracle Accelerate is Oracle’s approach to provide business software solutions to midsize organizations. Oracle partners deliver complete software and services packaged in rapid, low cost implementations. The keys to this approach are Oracle Business Accelerators. They allow solution providers to deliver industry-leading practices gained via more than 24,000 implementations in a low cost fixed-scope implementation.

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