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A case study with comments by
Mandy Chan, Vice President of Financial Systems



Ion Media Networks PowerOLAP is Ready for Prime Time!



PowerOLAP solution is an all-around hit—for report-creation, operating and capital budgeting, and project accounting—with data dynamically sourced from Epicor.

PowerOLAP has proven to be “ready for prime time”—and more—as an all-around business intelligence solution at Ion Media Networks, formerly known as Paxson Communications—a broadcasting company with the largest television station group in the country. “With PowerOLAP, we can react more strategically, moving from data analysis to management by instantaneously checking our operational and financial performance numbers, sourced dynamically from Epicor as well as in-house systems,” noted Mandy Chan, Vice President of Financial Systems. Chan oversees the customized solution that provides immediate reporting via Excel; online operating and capital budgeting capabilities, also through Excel; and project accounting that can break down budgeted expenses to the single staff level—all achievable via PowerOLAP’s integration with Ion Media’s underlying database systems.

With over 100 different stations in markets throughout the country, Ion Media has emerged as one of the premier national broadcast networks. The company continues to grow through the acquisition of additional stations and the expansion of its distribution through cable agreements. Its information needs are impressive, ever changing and immediate, not least because revenues are based in part on a highly perishable product—advertising, the costs for which depend on time-slot, ratings, and sell-out rate.

Chan first addressed the company’s reporting requirements. PowerOLAP’s front end use of Excel—requiring less training than other products—and its back-end integration with Epicor made the PARIS solution an optimal choice. “Excel-based reports from PowerOLAP cubes, with data sourced from Epicor, have replaced the pre-formatted reports we did before. There’s no waiting for the PowerOLAP reports—we see them instantaneously. Along with speed, PowerOLAP provides us with a greater choice in what tool to use for new reports, based on performance.” PowerOLAP’s integration tool, OLAP Exchange, also sources data from Ion Media’s in-house databases—Sales, Billing, Advertising—enabling Chan to “slice-and-dice” data from Epicor and from these systems and then combine them easily within standard or ad hoc reports. The reports can be customized with all of Excel’s graphical and formatting features.

Ion Media leverages the PowerOLAP-Excel connection for an operating budget system as well. “Previously we used file formats to import data into Epicor, which could take up to 30 minutes for each station. Now staff enter figures directly into cubes via Excel templates, showing immediate results. We are also able to import files into PowerOLAP, in as little as one or two minutes.” Chan added: “We now use our budgets proactively—since we are able to see variance data so quickly, we can alert people who have gone over budget and get them to cut back.” This is a prime example of how PowerOLAP enables firms to strategize via online budgeting, reacting quickly on the basis of up-to-the instant data.



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PowerOLAP is used for capital budgeting as well, with data from Epicor's AP and PO components. "We didn't have a tool for this—we created it entirely within PowerOLAP through its integration with Epicor," Chan noted. "We now can do variance analysis to determine what has been committed that has been budgeted or not budgeted, and we are able to re-forecast on the basis of 'what if' scenarios."

Another benefit of Ion Media's PowerOLAP solution is for detailed project accounting. "This capability isn't available on the budgeting side in Epicor, only in Actuals. Now we create detailed budgeting for travel and expenses at the staff level, sourcing each person's name from Epicor into PowerOLAP, and see the variances with Actuals."

Beyond the numerous solutions that PowerOLAP has provided already—for reporting, budgeting, project accounting—Chan foresees extending the product's use at Ion Media. For one, there is the ongoing integration with other in-house systems beyond Epicor. This points up one of the main benefits of the product: because PowerOLAP can source data from many underlying systems at once—via OLAP Exchange or the lightning fast importation of text files—companies like Ion Media can continually extend their solution without purchasing additional modules or cobbling other products onto their system. "And we foresee Web-enabling our capabilities," Chan added. "For example, so that we could send a file showing the details of capital expenditures awaiting approval, and then allow the management person to add an electronic signature to indicate OK." This could be accomplished via PowerOLAP's Web Portal, which extends a users' real-time capabilities, through a Web browser alone, to create unlimited reports and analytical views, including graphs, of data made available to them. Web Portal also allows clients to enter figures into PowerOLAP cubes—from wherever they can make an Internet connection.

While it might be overstating matters to say that PowerOLAP has made Chan feel (to borrow a title of one of Ion Media's hits) Touched by an Angel, we might say that the overall solution at Ion Media is turning out to be (to borrow another title)—a Bonanza!

For more information about Ion Media Networks, please see www.ionmedia.tv.

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