

# Making friends with APS and Miramo®

**UK financial services group Friends Provident is benefiting from huge improvements in flexibility, timeliness and quality in the production of Web bulletins for sales staff and independent financial advisers, thanks to Interlagos APS and Miramo.**

A bit like sports leagues, popular music charts or weather statistics, the financial markets generate a constant stream of numerical information that needs to be collated, analysed and presented in meaningful ways to a variety of audiences. At leading UK financial products and services provider Friends Provident the task was to provide monthly investment performance and analysis bulletins to sales staff and independent financial advisers (IFAs).

The marketing department was producing a monthly 12-page bulletin whose 40,000 copy print run was almost all being sent to the firm's 12 area offices. Keen to capitalise on the reach, immediacy and near-zero distribution costs of the Internet, Friends Provident entered in 2002 into an outsourcing arrangement with a third-party company to produce a Web-friendly version of the bulletin.

The logistics of this arrangement meant that all the asset allocation splits and commentary had to be provided on a fixed date each month and seven days later the bulletin would be put onto the Web site. As Fund Communication Manager Dorothy Critchley explains, "This system gave us no opportunity to proofread or make changes to the bulletin before it went live, and consequently any inaccuracies had to stay on the Web site for a month."

Further, the external production agreement only allowed changes to the Web document template once per quarter, and these were charged-for. Some changes, such as the removal of a page, took up to nine months to come into effect.

It wasn't just this inflexibility with content that caused concern at Friends Provident, the look of the Web publication was not felt to be ideal either.

"Because the company producing the Web bulletins were not graphic design specialists,

the layout, fonts and general look of the bulletin often left a lot to be desired, and asking for changes caused anguish for both parties," recalls Critchley. "And the cost was significant, considering that the finished article was never exactly what we wanted."

The difficulties didn't stop there, either. There was still a requirement to print the Web bulletin but the format used wasn't suitable for printers and much time was spent in meetings trying to overcome the difficulties that this posed.

## The Interlagos intervention

Clearly there had to be a more flexible, faster and more cost-effective way of doing things. A couple of alternatives were under consideration when an approach to Friends Provident by systems integrator Interlagos brought the latter's Advanced Publishing System (APS) to the attention of Dorothy Critchley and her colleagues. APS interfaces with the Miramo database publishing engine to provide powerful but easy-to-use automated document composition.

"We were encouraged by Interlagos's demonstration of APS and Miramo," says Critchley, "it seemed to be a product that we would have more control over, with increased flexibility and ease of use. The short set-up time and ability to make our own template changes as and when required was a definite plus point."

A key deciding factor for Friends Provident was a visit to an existing Miramo user, which also happened to be one of the Investment Partners used by the company. "When we saw their printed documents we were very impressed," recalls Critchley. "They didn't have anything to sell, either, so we knew we could rely on their opinions."

An important requirement for the system was that the Web documents it generated

## CASE STUDY

### Friends Provident

Founded in 1832 to provide life assurance for members of the Society of Friends – or Quakers – Friends Provident today has core businesses in Life & Pensions and Asset Management with total assets under management of more than \$172bn.

Producing Web versions of reports and bulletins via an outsourcing arrangement was clumsy and inflexible and didn't reflect the visual style of the company.

Now, Interlagos APS and Miramo allow marketing staff to generate a range of fully up-to-date and professionally formatted documents in minutes.



APS's short set-up time and the ability to make our own template changes were definite plus points.



could be printed reliably, both on office printing devices and by commercial printing companies. The ability of the APS/Miramo solution to generate various types of PDF or PostScript files for commercial printing, with complete visual fidelity between the two, ensured that this criterion was met.

Having decided that the APS/Miramo combination would satisfy their requirements for both online and printed publishing, Friends Provident also decided that instead of having a single monthly bulletin containing everything, they would prefer to have a greater number of more precisely-targeted publications that would meet IFA and sales staff's exact needs in a more flexible way. The monthly bulletin would be replaced by two new 20-page technical bulletins for the company's bond ranges, plus 10 two- or three-page bulletins with performance and asset allocations of different fund ranges.

#### Bulletins in seconds

The necessary document templates were designed in parallel with a corporate identity revamp and the APS/Miramo system went live in September 2004. Marketing staff at Friends Provident access the system via the corporate intranet, running a custom-developed Java applet in their usual Web browser, and select the type of document they want to produce. The necessary component files – Excel spreadsheets, Word documents, graphics and PDFs – are all placed in specific directories where APS can find them.

APS extracts numerical data from the spreadsheet files and drives Miramo to create a variety of chart types or tabular setting from these, as defined by the chosen template. Text from Word files is read and formatted according to the template's specifications for font, size, alignment and justification. Graphics in a variety of formats are placed and scaled again as defined in the template and then a PDF file of the resulting document is generated. PDF 'bookmarks', hyperlinks that enable readers to jump directly to specified pages or positions in the text, are generated automatically as part of the template.

Once the source files are in place, the entire document composition process takes a few seconds, compared to the whole week it was taking with the outsourced service. The ability to make changes up to the last moment is a huge benefit and the speed of document composition makes it very easy for Dorothy Critchley and her colleagues to make draft or test versions of document to check that all the required data is in place.

The Miramo templates not only reflect Friends Provident's new corporate identity but also ensure that professional design and layout are implemented in every publication. The use of PDF as an electronic format ensures complete fidelity between the bulletins and other printed materials. The



**APS produces complex, fully-formatted documents to professional design and publishing standards with up-to-the-minute market information in tabular or graphical form (above). The browser-based user interface makes choosing the desired document type and content both quick and easy (top).**

PDFs can be printed to any office printer, making it a simple matter to produce printed versions for IFAs or customers who prefer to receive hardcopies.

Dorothy Critchley and her colleagues are delighted with the success of the system, especially since it has made possible the expansion in bulletin documents:

"We wouldn't have even considered trying to do that under the old production arrangement," she comments, "but now there is so much potential and we want to make the most of it. It's really going to make a big difference."

If commercial printing of APS/Miramo-authored documents is required, it's a simple matter of choosing PostScript file output or a high-end print-compatible type of PDF from the APS interface screen and handing-off the resulting file. Again, there will be complete fidelity between versions printed this way and those generated for Web and email use.

Looking ahead, Friends Provident plans to increase the number and range of documents that are produced using APS and Miramo. ■

Friends Provident  
Pixham End, Dorking, Surrey  
RH4 1QA, United Kingdom  
www.friendsprovident.co.uk

Interlagos Ltd  
Tel: +44 (0)20 8763 8801  
www.interlagos.co.uk

Datzone Ltd  
Tel: +353 64 40710  
Fax: +353 64 40711  
www.miramo.com

