The Expert's Opinion

An interview with
Jack M. Sparn, Vice President of Data Center Operations and Technical Services
Time, Inc.

Interview by Paul Cheney
University of South Florida

IRMJ: How important is information technology (IT) in your industry, and your organization?

Sparn: The publishing industry, now more than ever before, is technology driven. As a wholly-owned service and data management subsidiary of Time Inc.—one of the world’s largest and most profitable publishing concerns—Time Customer Service is, first and foremost, an information based company. The collection and use of data is vital to the services we provide our clients and customers and technology is the vehicle used to capture, store, manage and distribute this mass of information. As an example, TCS each year processes in excess of 3 million customer service calls, 150 million pieces of incoming mail, and close to 300 million pieces of outgoing mail in support of Time Inc.’s magazine and catalog fulfillment businesses, both domestically and around the globe.

Adding further emphasis to our information management role is the fact that the publishing industry has become increasingly market and consumer-driven, requiring a heightened level of responsiveness to a diverse mix of consumer demands. More and more, consumers demand products that meet their unique needs or interests. As examples, the industry is moving toward selective binding and selective advertising, creating products that interest a specific reader or market segment through the use of custom-tailored subscriber magazines. Readers request selective editorial material that specifically highlight those topics or interests they have previously communicated to the publisher. This, of course, also provides added value to our advertisers, who then target these consumers based on their expressed areas of interest. To provide such targeted advertising or editorial material requires the fulfillment service to warehouse extensive information about its readers in an easily accessible way. This data management allows for customer magazines to be “built” for that unique subscriber or market segment right on-line, at the printing plant stage. It is through such powerful technological advances as relational databases, desktop computers, automation of printing plant processes and telecommunications that has prompted such specialized customer and business information services, with many more dramatic advances on the near horizon.

IRMJ: Please name and briefly describe some of your strategic IT applications?

Sparn: Our most strategic applications are the order processing, customer service, distribution, billing, and marketing information systems. In fact, TCS’ domestic and international magazine marketing fulfillment systems are among the most sophisticated in the industry. These systems run in Tampa, Florida and are accessed from several domestic locations as well as sites in Europe, Latin America, and the South Pacific.

Of course, our main business is magazine and catalog fulfillment data processing and customer service, the core of our transactions managed on large scale IBM mainframes (MVS, CICS). Also critical to our ability to capture and handle incoming and outgoing mail volumes are specialized platforms utilizing optical scanning equipment, automated mail handling devices and LAN based PCs, each of which have significantly leveraged our ability to process mail and customer service calls with superior turnaround and promise to raise our already aggressive service levels adding value further to our client’s investment. We are