

Thorntons' recipe for success with Microsoft BI

"XL Cubed has provided Thorntons with the flexibility and performance our business users need to unlock the potential in our data."

Steve Harris, Head of IT, Thorntons

Customer Background

Established in 1911 and a long term fixture of UK high streets, Thorntons is one of Britain's largest chocolate makers and best-loved chocolate brands. Thorntons offer a number of firmly established household name ranges including Classics, Continental and Special Toffee, alongside innovative new lines such as Indulgence.

Today Thorntons is a multi-channel business with over 200 own stores and cafes across the UK and Ireland, nearly 200 franchise stores, and an online presence through Thorntons Direct. The FMCG division, which covers commercial and international sales and private label, has seen strong growth in the last few years, bringing Thorntons to an ever wider range of customers.



The Challenge

Thorntons had an existing Data Warehouse environment based on Microsoft SQL Server and Analysis Services which had operated for a decade. Users from a variety of functional areas in the business accessed the cubes through the Intelligent Apps Excel add-in, which was used for self service reporting and analysis, alongside Reporting Services for delivery of a smaller number of formal reports. The database environment was SQL Server 2000 and Analysis Services.

The platform had served the business well, but as Intelligent Apps was no longer being developed it presented challenges in terms of compatibility with the newer versions of Microsoft Office and SQL Server, and was hindering the ability to upgrade these. A second concern was that access to BI data for non Head Office users was frustratingly slow. This had led to more limited usage by remote users and an increasing number of report and query requests being sent through to Head Office. Finally, there was a need for a mobile BI capability to service the growing community of smartphone and tablet users.

The chosen solution needed to offer more in reporting and analysis, to address the current issues with remote and mobile access, and be able to operate on both their current and future versions of Office and SQL Server.



Customer Profile:

Region: UK

Industry: Retailer & Chocolatier

Business Situation:

Thorntons needed to upgrade their Business Intelligence tools to give more flexibility in reporting and analysis, a better experience for remote users including mobile delivery, and to enable migration to the current versions of Office and SQL Server.

Solution:

Thorntons evaluated several client tools to replace their Intelligent Apps solution before selecting XL Cubed as the best fit for their needs.

Power users have XL Cubed Excel Edition for analysis and report design, and can easily share reports and dashboards with remote users through their intranet portal.

Remote and mobile users benefit from fast access to reporting and slice and dice analysis, and receive regular fixed reports through the scheduling service.

Customer Solution
Share
Report
Analyze

XLCubed

The decision process

Thorntons considered a number of potential replacement products. There was a natural leaning toward Excel remaining a core part of the solution based on their successful history with an Excel-based product and the number of key users in the finance department. An initial consideration was to use native Excel itself, connecting to the cubes through Pivot Tables but this was not seen as a realistic option due to the degree of functionality which would be lost.

XLCubed was identified as an early front-runner based on its strong Excel integration and the capability for web and mobile deployment. Thorntons evaluated XLCubed over a number of months, initially focusing on just the Excel Edition and then broadening that to include the Web product. The business needed to be able to handle the existing reporting requirement, but also to extend this further while providing for the delivery of targeted dashboards, scheduled report delivery and mobile access.



The Solution

After a successful evaluation and POC phase Thorntons chose XLCubed as their new Business Intelligence platform. XLCubed staff ran an onsite training workshop for the existing power users in Thorntons, who picked up the tools quickly and ran a series of internal sessions to share the knowledge with the wider user community.

After rollout Thorntons were pleased by performance gains for the Head Office users despite both the cubes and XLCubed running on unchanged hardware. Further improvements followed when the data platform was migrated to SQL 2012 and new hardware, with the users taking the opportunity to fully re-work and optimise the key XLCubed reporting packs.

XLCubed has now been deployed across the business, in departments including Finance, Retail Trading, Brand Marketing, Planning & Supply, Commercial Sales, and the Retail and Franchise Field teams. Users have benefitted from more flexible reporting and analytics, alongside a much richer dashboard environment. The ability for reports to be quickly and easily replicated for multiple shops has proven particularly important for some of the key users. The core users in Excel have the cube-focused query and reporting power they need, and can easily share their output through XLCubed Web. The web portal provides remote users with hugely improved response times for both standard reports and also interactive ad-hoc analysis. Remote and mobile users also receive fixed reporting through the XLCubed scheduling service.

User acceptance has proved both strong and fast as shown in a user satisfaction survey run by Thorntons where 100% of the users surveyed felt XLCubed “does everything I need” in terms of reporting and analysis.

Steve Harris, Head of IT at Thorntons commented “XLCubed has provided Thorntons with the flexibility and performance our business users need to unlock the potential in our data”.

Customer Solution

“Alongside the strengths of the products themselves, the team at XLCubed have been fantastic - providing excellent training and support for our implementation and go-live”

Phil Hicking,
Head of Financial Planning
& Management Accounting,
Thorntons

XLCubed Limited

Maidenhead Court Boathouse,
Court Road,
Maidenhead,
SL6 8LQ, UK

email: info@XLCubed.com

tel: +44 1628 763222

fax: +44 1628 634403



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Gold Business Intelligence
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