



Food & Beverage Industry Brief



Content Created for Junction Solutions, Microsoft Dynamics AX Gold Partner



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Not Your Father's Functionality

How Microsoft & Excel are Redefining Business Intelligence/Business Analysis in the Food and Beverage Industry

OVERVIEW

As internal demands for product tracking, inventory management, and cost-saving efficiencies meet external expectations for product innovations, regulatory compliance, and competitive pricing, the Food and Beverage (F&B) industry looks toward robust Business Intelligence/Business Analysis (BI/BA) tools to determine how to stay ahead of the competition, increase profitability, and optimize operations. To track data, many companies are turning to information management systems that integrate with Microsoft Office, specifically Excel, for reporting and analytics.

A LOOK AT THE BUSINESS INTELLIGENCE LANDSCAPE

The infusion of technology into today's social, commercial, and legislative environment means data is easier than ever to track, organize, and interpret for an inside look at how current business processes are being received and accepted by consumers. This knowledge can help companies position their operations, management, and product/service offerings to better meet customer demands, manage risks, and drive efficiencies. Specifically within the F&B industry, business intelligence and analytics are vital to understanding how the buyer landscape is affecting the corporate bottom line. Primary industry considerations include how to keep products innovative and appealing and operations running efficiently and effectively, while also juggling the pressures of commodity pricing, stringent retailer demand, and ever-tightening governmental regulations for transparency and traceability.

While BI/BA data may be more readily available, compiling it into a format accessible and applicable across business segments can prove challenging. According to the KPMG 2013 Food and Beverage Industry Outlook Survey, 46 percent of respondents ranked their company's data and analytics capability as "average or below," and 16 percent believed their organizations were lagging behind competitors in utilizing analytics to gain a competitive advantage,¹ with the usability and adaptability of programs designed to store and manage analytical intelligence as a chief consideration. To consolidate and format information for user-friendly access and manipulation, new solutions are incorporating powerful new spreadsheet interfaces that allow for advanced data browsing and reporting capabilities.



An emerging market leader for adoption and usability in this space is Microsoft's BI platform, which includes Microsoft Office 2013, SQL Server, and SharePoint. A perhaps surprise standout in this collection is the innovative new Microsoft Excel. Long heralded for its calculation and graphing capabilities, Excel is now integrated into analytical systems to manage data into more flexible and dynamic views, including native document and presentation formats, charts, and pivot tables for ad-hoc reviews and audits. From browser-based add-ins that enhance cell-based reporting to virtual solutions that leverage Microsoft's new cloud-based environment, F&B companies are increasingly looking to Excel for modern data management and analysis.

MICROSOFT BI TRANSITIONS EASILY INTO EXISTING OFFICE SUITE

Because many F&B organizations already rely on the Microsoft Office suite of applications for information management and organization, applying its capabilities to business intelligence and analysis is a relatively streamlined transition. Its ability to integrate into existing, familiar systems makes Excel not only cost effective, but a flexible, user-friendly solution mapped to customer and market expectations, as noted by global research and advisory firm Forrester, which recognized Microsoft as a market-leading agile BI vendor in its July 2014 report, "The Forrester Wave™: Agile Business Intelligence Platforms, Q3 2014." The report defined agility as the ability to "adapt, react, and succeed in the midst of an unending fountain of customer-driven requirements" (business agility) and "gather customer and market knowledge and rapidly incorporate it into decisions" (information agility).²

CLOUD-BASED TOOLS ENHANCE CUSTOMER EXPERIENCE

Available via the new Office 365, a new innovative offering is Microsoft Power BI, which bundles the three Microsoft BI programs (Office, SQL Server, and SharePoint) into a comprehensive, cloud-based platform. With features such as geospatial 3D, natural language queries, and self-service for data extraction, transformation, and loading (ETL), the application facilitates both internal discussions and external outreach. In February 2014, leading information technology research and advisory firm Gartner published a report titled, "Magic Quadrant for Business Intelligence and Analytics Platforms" that praised the ability of Power BI to "contribute to Microsoft's overall vision and make it a strong contender for addressing the requirements to bridge the divide between business and enterprise users."³

Not only does the cloud help boost user adoption of this tool, but Power BI also streamlines implementation and management of Microsoft Office, SQL Server, and SharePoint, lowering deployment challenges and the total cost of BI ownership by bundling the most commonly used Microsoft products, reducing license expenses. These and other advantages are noted as helping to make Microsoft a user favorite among BI platform competitors. In the customer survey conducted for the Gartner Magic Quadrant, Microsoft's strong BI infrastructure and development tools ranked number one, with users also rating as "above average" its reporting, ad hoc query, Office integration, data mashup, collaboration, search and embedded BI, online analytical processing (OLAP), and customer experience.⁴ Similarly, the Forrester report recognized the platform for its customer-focused features, including self-service



capabilities, which enable users to provision their own BI applications and data, a user-friendly interface, and overall product vision.⁵

To strengthen its mobile presence, Microsoft also plans to offer HTML5 support for report viewing and will expand its cloud-based Power BI into a mobile application. These objectives are promising, as Microsoft's respondents comprised one of the highest percentage groups (51 percent) planning to implement mobile BI in the coming year.⁶

ADVANCED VISUALIZATION CAPABILITIES ILLUSTRATE BI/BA RELATIONSHIPS

Microsoft's BI solution features capabilities that provide innovative ways to explore and map information, with its advanced data visualization (ADV) functionality receiving a perfect 5.0/5.0 score in the Forrester report for richness of ADV content and data visualization effectiveness.⁷ A primary feature is its Data Model tool, which allows users to create a collection of tables to show relationships between multiple data sources, both native and external. This analysis can then be developed into specialized dashboards, PivotCharts, PivotTables, and other visually dynamic elements, including scorecards, which use graphical indicators to show how close performance is to one or more targeted metrics based on key performance indicators (KPIs). Similarly, data patterns and trends can also be determined through Microsoft SQL Server Analysis Services, which provide OLAP tools to allow users to design, create, and visualize data mining models from multidimensional structures comprised of aggregated data sources.⁸

CUSTOMIZED REPORTING STRENGTHENS FORECASTING

And while Microsoft Excel's reporting capabilities are well known and widely used for business presentations and research, their forecasting and analytical capabilities also position them as powerful new tools for BI/BA management. By a mouse click or drag, data can easily be selected and sorted into reports directly mapped to specific business requirements. Even seemingly disparate information can be filtered into a report or scorecard via the slicer tool, with timeline control providing enhanced flexibility when filtering PivotCharts by date, allowing users to analyze data based on either a single time period or range of time.⁹

Once analyses are conducted in Excel, employees can publish the items to a centralized SharePoint server, where they can be stored, shared, and managed. Additional capabilities provided by SharePoint include PerformancePoint Services, which consolidates reports from multiple sources, including SQL Server, SharePoint lists, and Excel Services, into a single Performance Point dashboard for quick retrieval, and Visio Services, which enables designers to turn complicated text and tables into Visio diagrams that communicate information at a glance.¹⁰

FORWARD FACING: A LOOK TO THE FUTURE

Though these powerful Microsoft business intelligence tools, including Excel, may not yet be commonplace in the F&B market space, its reporting functionality and visualization capabilities make it an excellent choice for analysts seeking to develop, manage, and share business insights to better



position their organizations for success. Add to that the solution's cost-effectiveness and native, seamless interoperability with critical business tools like Office Suite and Dynamics AX, and these BI solutions are likely to rapidly gain ubiquity in the industry.

As a leading Microsoft partner specializing in the F&B industry, Junction Solutions is uniquely positioned to help industry leaders redefine and re-imagine how his new platform suite can be leveraged to take maximum advantage of the power and insights their data can deliver to the business as a whole, and to the bottom line.

JUNCTION SOLUTIONS

Junction Solutions provides vertical-specific on-premise, hosted and cloud-based software and services for the Produce industry. Junction Solutions' portfolio includes enterprise resource planning (ERP), supply chain management (SCM—demand, warehouse, yard and transportation management), production and scheduling optimization, grower accounting, trade promotions management, direct store delivery management, merchandising, order entry and mobile/web-enabled product sourcing and traceability. For more information, please visit www.junctionsolutions.com.

Endnotes

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9. Ibid.
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