

"We knew we needed a multi-threaded environment to succeed."

4D Helps People Rent-Direct

PONGA CONSULTING
THE ACUMEN GROUP

WWW.RENT-DIRECT.COM



Looking for an apartment in New York City is no easy task. Besides looking for affordable housing, prospective tenants often have to deal with a broker's fee after finding a place, a fee which frequently equals two months rent paid to the broker in addition to already outrageous monthly rent prices. Realizing the disadvantages of such a process, Apartments Illustrated, Inc. offers an online apartment-searching service, www.Rent-Direct.com, that allows prospective tenants to avoid brokers' fees by giving them access to hundreds of apartment listings online. By registering with www.Rent-Direct.com for a one-time fee, individuals can develop their own profiles of apartments that they're looking for, and have access to apartment listings that fit those profiles.

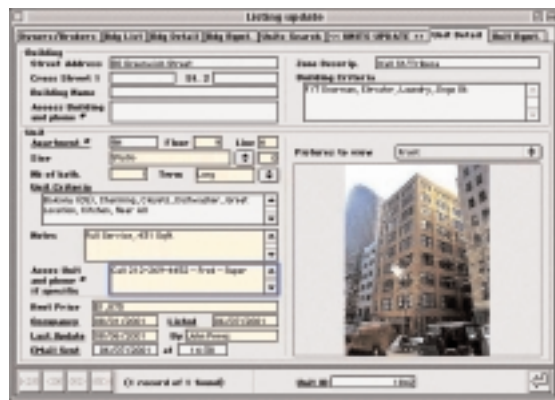
With approximately 1,700 landlords and 3,800 buildings from Manhattan and the surrounding boroughs on their Web site, Apartments Illustrated needed a database solution that was able to handle the expanding nature of their business, and a Web solution reliable enough to support a dynamic presence on the Internet. Apartments Illustrated originally had a Filemaker database solution in place. However, this solution began to falter in many areas as they business

grew; as traffic to the site increased, and more and more people began to perform searches for apartments, they began to notice that the technology they were using was too slow. In addition, their database environment was not as customizable as they wanted it to be, making the creation of different apartment profiles for their clients a difficult process. According to Larry Rosenberg, Vice President of Apartments Illustrated, the single-threaded environment of Filemaker was hindering the most significant aspects of his online business. "The single-threaded environment caused searches to be slow on our site, making clients wait a long time before their searches were performed. It was also difficult to maintain the several apartment profiles that had been created by our clients. We knew we needed a multi-threaded environment to succeed."

IMPROVING PERFORMANCE WITH 4D

As a result, Apartments Illustrated sought the help of 4D partner The Acumen Group and one of the lead 4D developers, Christophe Flament, to implement a 4D database solution. Flament, a 4D developer from Ponga Consulting who was working for The Acumen Group, was in charge of developing the 4D database and transitioning from Filemaker into 4D. For Flament, the process of migrating existing projects from

The 4D interface allows rental agents to easily manage apartment listings for prospective tenants.



In Focus

- 4D Server
- 4D WebSTAR Server Suite
- 4D Connect directly integrates 4D database with 4D WebSTAR server
- 4D Internet Commands Plug-in sends images from local machine to server

"4D has enabled us to grow at a faster rate and at a lower cost than our competition."

Filemaker into 4D was smooth with the help of 4D Assimilator, a free utility from 4D, Inc. that clones data structures and data files from any database supporting ODBC. "During the first phase of the project, I developed a new 4D database that incorporated and enhanced most of the functionality found in Filemaker, but added several new features," said Flament. "I used 4D Assimilator to bring the main FileMaker tables into 4D. I then imported the Filemaker data into 4D via a text file."

From here, Flament continued to focus on enhancing the features of the 4D database, particularly in terms of interface objects that would help Apartments Illustrated agents have greater control over client management. Said Flament, "Over the next four months, I developed a 4D Database with the following characteristics: a streamlined, easy-to-use 4D interface to allow agents to manage a set of prospects and listings of apartments. This was done via a one-screen interface with the information clearly displayed on several tabs. The same streamlined interface was used to enter graphic information into the database. The 4D Internet Commands plug-in was used to FTP the images from the local machine to an FTP server." With the help of Flament's developments within the 4D environment, agents could quickly access information regarding newly registered clients, and then e-mail or upload pictures accordingly. "The administrative people could manage a set of parameters and review on-the-fly the current load and the registering of new clients," adds Flament. "They can also control several processes doing some background tasks like composing and sending e-mail, uploading pictures, and more."

CONQUERING THE WORLD OF THE WEB

Flament already had 4D WebSTAR servers in place, so when it came to creating a dynamic Web presence, he knew that the current situation would greatly benefit from incorporating 4D Web technologies. Flament chose to implement 4D Connect, a free 4D WebSTAR-to-4D integration tool that provides direct integration between the 4D WebSTAR Server Suite and the 4th Dimension relational database. For Flament, 4D Connect fit the Web serving needs of Rent-Direct.com, particularly with the template-based

approach that is offered within it. By assembling pages on the fly, 4D Connect assembles pages utilizes 'incomplete' templates that are sent to 4D to be completed and returned to WebSTAR for serving. These templates contain 4D Tags which tell 4D to run a method (i.e. stored set of instructions) that directs it to fill in values for variables. Each request to 4D then specifies how the form is to be filled out. Said Flament, "The template approach offered by 4D Connect was extremely attractive. In addition, this approach helped to define the boundary between what was served by 4D and what pages were going to be static." 4D Connect was also a cost-effective, powerful way to connect Flament's newly developed 4D database solutions to the existing 4D WebSTAR servers.

Since May 2001, the Web site has been live using 4D WebSTAR, 4D Connect, and 4D Server. Currently, 4D Server is running on a G4 733 MHz with 400 MB allocated to 4D, with as many as 1,200 to 1,600 people viewing the Web site on a daily basis. Also, 4D WebSTAR is running on an iMac. The database is currently around 400 MB, and between 750,000 to one million e-mails are sent every two weeks to clients via 4D Internet Commands. For Rosenberg, one of the largest benefits of using 4D technologies has been reliability. "Unlike most of our competitors, we don't have a full-time technical support person on staff and we're finding that we don't need one," said Rosenberg. "4D has enabled us to grow at a faster rate and at a lower cost than our competition."

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