



Farrow & Ball

Paint and paper manufacturer Farrow & Ball, supports its ambitious growth plans with a powerful business intelligence solution



Company Overview

Farrow & Ball Ltd has been making paint in Dorset, one batch at a time, since the company was founded in 1946. The company remains independent, offering customers an unrivalled range of paints and wallpapers.

Key Benefits

- “Self-service” business insights by finance employees reducing internal IT support.
- Improved speed and accuracy of Business Intelligence performance allowing decisions to be made quickly.
- A “single point of truth” for sales and financial information improving accuracy of decision making.
- Rapidly adapt to market trends to maximise stock holdings and react to sales demand.
- Plan for the future with reliable data from the core ERP system.

Craftsmen in paint and paper

Following a private equity-backed management buyout in August 2006, Farrow & Ball entered a phase of rapid growth, developing its presence in the UK and worldwide while safeguarding the traditional values and quality of its handcrafted wallpapers and paint.

To support its ambitious growth plan and create a structured environment for reporting and analysis, Farrow & Ball initially invested in IFS Applications, a component-based ERP suite.

While the IFS system integrated management information across the business, they still lacked an efficient means of extracting and using data.

“The Excel-based BI module built into IFS gave us a degree of online analytical processing (OLAP) capability, however, this was only ever intended as a stopgap before investing in a more powerful and purpose-designed BI system,” Neil Spreadbury, Commercial Finance Manager.

Simpson Associates commits to tight timescales

To meet performance management criteria, Farrow & Ball envisioned a selfservice business intelligence solution, enabling finance and operations to run reports independently, and a centralised data repository optimised for efficient output and analysis.

In 2011 the company began a search process, initially focused on evaluating suitable vendor solutions before short-listing providers. “Simpson Associates impressed, delivering well considered responses rather than a sales pitch, and a convincing case for IBM Cognos Business Intelligence software,” says Spreadbury.

Decisively, Simpson Associates gave an assurance that commencement in June was achievable, meeting all the project deliverables by October. This was critical for the management team who were dependent on the BI solution for key financials and sales data.

With a successful BI solution fundamental to growth, and keen interest from its investors, Farrow & Ball accepted Simpson Associates’ bid to build a Microsoft SQL Server 2008 R2 data warehouse and an IBM Cognos Business Intelligence application, which would underpin sales reporting and analysis and inform the firm’s strategy for new showrooms.

Phased implementation began in June 2011, with sales the first priority. To build the project brief, the team undertook detailed requirements gathering, understanding their needs and identifying critical issues within the sales function.

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Staged development and training

Simpson Associates combined staged development of the Cognos framework with concurrent training and workshops to ensure broad knowledge of the tools being deployed. The project team also looked at how to specify reports, stipulating where figures would be derived from, and creating a common business glossary.

As with all projects, structure and controls were key; Simpson Associates uses Prince 2 project management 'with a dose of real life,' enabling an agile response to change and the flexibility for work-arounds. The project team provided complementary guidance to further develop sales reporting, including the integration of footfall data from retail outlets and reconciliation of inbound transactions.

Unlocking new possibilities

Farrow & Ball has embraced a high level of skills transfer and is now virtually self-sufficient, developing its own reports and only seeking assistance for larger, more complex projects. System reliability, and the ability to analyse on a self-service basis, is a boon to users and takes pressure off the Commercial Finance and Admin teams. Information can now be quickly extracted without grinding core systems to a halt.

According to Spreadbury, the major difficulty pre-BI was speed. "It would take a long time to get any accurate data and meant interrogating the ERP system, which even at a relatively low level would cause knock on effects, slowing it down elsewhere and affecting our ability to get product to market. It's opened up new possibilities. We can analyse the data however we wish, knowing that it's a true representation."

Users can now generate reports which previously were too complex or time consuming. "It's opened up new possibilities," says Spreadbury. "We can analyse the data however we wish, knowing that it's a true representation. Reports can be run with instantaneous or next-day output, giving the sales team and other stakeholders the tools to do their job more effectively and responsively, and with total confidence in the figures."

Farrow & Ball sells its paint as a system and the additional analytics capability paints a clear picture of buying behaviour. "For example, using undercoat gives the best result," explains Spreadbury. "But understanding how many people actually do that, and what the constraints are, has enabled us to develop defined projects and precisely track the outcomes. Essentially we can pinpoint what finishes or colours are selling, and adapt our sales and marketing or optimise stockholding and manufacturing accordingly."

Building on solid foundations

Following successful implementation of sales reporting, Farrow & Ball retained Simpson Associates to deliver the operations and financial reporting phase, scheduled to go live in 2013. This represents a further opportunity to exploit the data captured by the core IFS application and to provide reliable growth metrics. Other data can be brought in from IFS, for example HR, and performance management capacity can be extended into budgeting, forecasting and planning. This would be integrated with the existing Cognos solution.

A flexible partnership

"Simpson Associates was dedicated to matching our brief, There was healthy debate of course but they always presented reasoned responses, or accommodated our wishes when needed. It's a very flexible relationship and the synergy we've built is vital to the knowledge transfer process."

Neil Spreadbury, Commercial Finance Manager

Farrow & Ball sees Cognos as a highly effective performance management tool, and is using its self-service skills to exploit the extensive BI resources at its fingertips. Its investors have praised the quality of BI output, which plays a core role in shaping the continued success of the business.

Contact us

Should you have any questions or require any further information, the team at Simpson Associates will be happy to help you with your request.

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