ACT! Steers Users to a New Dashboard

New Sage offering provides productivity and business intelligence improvements; one industry analyst suggests the new version closes the gap between contact management and SFA.

by Colin Beasty
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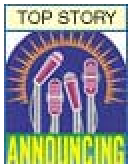

Sage Software has unveiled the latest version of its venerable ACT! application, with enhancements focused on increased usability and on the introduction of a new dashboard. The release, labeled version 10.0, was timed to coincide with the software's 20th anniversary.

"It's an application that's been in the marketplace for a very long time," says Larry Ritter, senior vice president of global product management for Sage CRM Solutions, "and I believe a testament to the product's versatility and staying power." The announcement extends across the entire ACT! by Sage product line:

- ACT! by Sage 2008 (10.0);
- ACT! by Sage Premium 2008 (10.0); and
- ACT! by Sage Premium for Web 2008 (10.0).

The centerpiece of this year's product releases are new customizable dashboards that allow individuals and workgroups to access sales metrics and activity details via graphical elements. Users can hover over charts for drill-down details or click on graphics to take further action. Users can also create emails, make calls, schedule meetings, or add additional metrics or details to existing opportunities from the dashboard. In addition, the dashboards can be copied into various external applications, including Microsoft Office programs, according to Ritter. "The big focus on the dashboard was making the application more interactive and intuitive," he says.

Sage also beefed up the product line's productivity by making the data more transparent to users. Salespeople can now edit fields within a contact, group, or company list view without having to open records individually, and each opportunity can now have multiple contacts associated with it. "This way, all decisionmakers associated with a sales opportunity can be tracked," Ritter says.

The fact that Sage has made ACT! more user-friendly is "ironical," says Rob Bois, senior research analyst with AMR Research. "They improved an application well known for its ease of use. I think Sage is simply doing what they do best...they're resting on their laurels."

Ritter, not surprisingly, disagrees. The focus on dashboards and group/user productivity, he says, is a response to the fact that Sage has seen ACT! move upstream. "A few years ago we were primarily targeting small businesses, but today we're seeing acceptance of ACT! in more medium-sized companies that operate with larger numbers of users." This trend is also a driving force behind Sage's emphasis on dashboards, says Denis Pombriant, managing principal at Beagle Research. "They're focusing on sharing information, and are continuing to close the gap between contact management and SFA," he says.

Shrinking that gap is critical if Sage expects ACT! to become more popular amongst larger organizations, Pombriant adds. "ACT! can do 90 percent of SFA and contact management, so the question then becomes, 'Is that last 5 or 10 percent extra worth the price for a larger [SFA] system for a larger company?' That's a compelling price proposition that Sage can now offer customers."

Sage also announced 63 ACT! Add-on solutions that are compatible with the new ACT! by Sage 2008. The add-ons offer productivity tools that simplify sales, marketing, financial, project management, reporting, mapping, and mobile device synchronization tasks. As an example, Ritter highlighted the integration with Google Maps, enabling a user to click on a customer address in ACT! to automatically upload a map of that address.

"These are the little things that add value to customers," Ritter says. "The tools and applications our partners have produced are solving specific problems for specific groups of customers, more than we could ever hope to tackle by ourselves. That's the value of continued support from our partner network."