

Web/Software Integration

A case for linking your website to your property management software.

Birch Management had a problem—too much success! Based out of Greensboro, North Carolina, Birch had enjoyed steady growth from 1988 to the present. Their commitment to customer satisfaction and ability to make intelligent business decisions allowed them to consistently acquire new properties, tenants and publicity. In short, business was good, but their success did not come without a price. According to Lee Porter, President of Birch Management, "One of the big issues that we started running into was that we were constantly entering the same data into multiple locations for our marketing." For Birch Management, the acquisition of more business resulted in the acquisition of more business data. More business data meant that they spent more time updating their many, disparate databases. The time Birch lost to daily maintenance tasks resulted in reduced productivity which began to influence their bottom line.

Many property management companies today face the same daunting task of maintaining two or more databases (one for your property management software, one for your accounting software, one for your website, etc.). And even if your software solution consolidates your property management and accounting into a single suite, you are still left manually updating your website's database every time a change is made through your management software—essentially twice the work.

If your business foregoes these daily maintenance activities, then your website may become "out of sync" with your actual business data. Many property management companies rely on their websites to market their properties and services to new tenants and owners. They cannot afford for their websites to become essentially obsolete. However, if you focus all of your effort on maintaining current data, then your business stops growing altogether. This problem has left many property managers wondering, "Isn't there a better way?"

There is.

It's called Web/Software Integration (WSI) and it's giving businesses like Birch Management an edge over the competition by streamlining their database maintenance activities, improving business agility, and guaranteeing that their website is always up-to-date. Dave Staun, Business Development Manager at SuperNet (an Ohio-based IT company) states, "Any management company with a website should seriously consider Web/Software Integration. In an industry as complex and competitive as property management, WSI is one of the big keys to success."

What is Web/Software Integration?

The goal of WSI is simple—to consolidate your website activities and your property management activities into a single process. What exactly does this mean? Suppose one of your tenants moves out of a single-family home. With a single click of the mouse, you can declare that rental unit as vacant within your management software which simultaneously updates your website to make that unit 'available' to prospective tenants searching online for rentable properties. If someone fills out an online application for that rental unit, your website instantly loads the application information into your management software, creating a new prospect in the process.

WSI allows any database update made through your software to immediately affect the content of your website, and vice versa. This feat of efficiency is achieved by eliminating your website database, and instead, having your site communicate directly with your property management software. In order to implement WSI, two things must be true: your management software must be programmed with a "back end" capable of communicating with your website, and second, your website must be properly coded to communicate with your property management software. Not every software solution allows for website integration, so if you use third-party software, it is important that you ask one of their representatives if this feature is available—and to what capacity.

Property management software companies that allow for WSI typically offer web-based applications that can be "plugged-in" to your existing site to leverage the power of a single, consolidated database. For example, Birch Management uses an application called Owner Web Access to let their owners view up-to-date financial information about their ownerships, run reports directly through the Birch website and even make contributions online. Another web application offered by Birch's property management software provider allows tenants to make payments online; those transactions are immediately processed by an electronic ACH provider and recorded by the management software. Tenants can even submit work orders online and view up-to-date account information pulled directly from the company's consolidated database.

Streamline your daily business operations

First and foremost, WSI can significantly lower your cost-per-unit management expenses by eliminating redundant database maintenance activities. Lee Porter states, "[WSI] allows us to perform the duties that we need to perform to be successful for our clients versus simply doing tasks." After Birch Management implemented WSI, their property managers were able to make updates to the consolidated database and have those changes automatically reflect on the website. The time saved through this process allowed them to spend more time on important tasks like marketing new units and reducing vacancies. By streamlining database maintenance through Web/Software Integration, property management companies can focus on business growth, not business maintenance.

Companies that integrate their websites with their property management software also experience faster unit turnaround and improved business agility. Time lost is money lost, so the longer it takes you to get a recently vacated unit back on your website, the longer it takes you to find a new customer for that unit. WSI automates the process of adding available units to your website so that you are always aggressively marketing your properties to new tenants. WSI can help with the processing of online prospect applications as well. In fact, Birch Management estimates that they have been able to process and screen prospects roughly 24 hours faster than they could prior to the implementation of WSI. Once again, this is due to the automation of key tasks like receiving prospect applications, sending them to a resident screening provider and tracking the prospect within the management software. Essentially, Web/Software Integration can help your business find new and responsible tenants faster and more efficiently.

Another advantage of WSI is the reduction of tenant and owner-related questions. Some property management companies find themselves inundated with occupant account questions and owner requests for reports and other information relating to their properties. According to Dave Staun, "Tenants and owners want to be able to access 'live' data concerning their accounts, not stale or summary statistics. This can only be achieved by integrating your site with your software." The purpose of these "plug-in" web applications is to offer tenants and property owners a controlled "window" into their live data as it exists within your property management software. By giving occupants the power to view their own account information and allowing owners to run their own reports and conduct business online, you can free your employees from spending all of their time answering their questions instead of focusing on more mission critical work.

Moving forward

Birch Management first implemented WSI with the help of its property management software provider at the end of 2008. According to Lee Porter, "It was instantly that we realized the time savings." Less than two years later, Birch now conducts over 40% of their day-to-day business online. WSI has helped Birch Management continue its growth even in tough economic times by automating daily maintenance tasks and guaranteeing that their website contains the most up-to-date business data available. And while larger property management companies are the ideal candidates for WSI, any business looking to streamline business practices or guarantee data integrity in all aspects of the company may be interested in this service offered by specific property management software solutions.

Dave Hegemann, President of London Computer Systems, is convinced that WSI will play an instrumental role in the future success of many property management companies. "People are always looking for ways to

consolidate and simplify their business practices. They don't want to use five different programs and maintain five different databases to do their work. That's why we introduced WSI into our property management software. In the same way that your Smartphone combines the internet with your phone on a single device, Web/Software Integration combines your property management and your web management into a single process."

Is WSI the future for all property management companies? Who knows. But in the meantime, Birch Management is certainly on board.

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