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New formula for apps access

Web services help chemical company send catalog updates in real time.

By John Fontana, 4/15/02

KINGSPORT, TENN. - In his role as "hype buster" for Eastman Chemical, Carroll Pleasant has been called upon to put Web services under his magnifying glass. So far, he likes what he sees, though concerns about performance and security have him moving cautiously.

Eastman is trying out Web services to give partners and customers speedier and more targeted access to applications, such as a product catalog of more than 400 chemicals, fibers and plastics. If Web services prove successful, the company will offer a range of them in hopes of generating new revenue.

"Web services are an [application] interface technology for us," says Pleasant, Eastman's principal emerging technologies analyst. "What's different is the idea that you can wrap up intellectual property in an object that can actually respond to different requests. It is not just: 'Send all the data you've got.' "

He compares Eastman's Product Catalog Web Service to a dictionary service on the Internet. "Would you rather have a service where I download the whole dictionary to you, or would you rather have a service that says you give me a word and I'll send you back the definition?"

Currently, distributors get catalog information from Eastman in many ways, such as by visiting the company's Web site and copying data, by "screen scraping" the Web site or by having Eastman e-mail them files. However, because the catalog is updated regularly but never on a scheduled basis, distributors

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often are left with dated information.

Using Web services, Eastman has created a way for distributors to access its product catalog and for them to push that access to their customers so everyone sees the same catalog in real time. Without Web services, every partner in the chain would have needed an identical application-integration server to gain such access, and Pleasant says that wouldn't have been practical.

"It doesn't take much technology just to consume our Web service," he says. Eastman's partners are supplied with lightweight code that sits on their intranet servers and lets them send catalog requests via messages based on Simple Object Access Protocol (SOAP), an XML protocol. SOAP creates a standard interface to activate the Microsoft Component Object Model Plus (COM+) interfaces used in Eastman's catalog application, called Saqqara. The COM+ interfaces remain on the Saqqara application server but are accessed through SOAP interfaces running on Eastman's WebMethods server, which provides a link to the Internet. The WebMethods server creates the SOAP interfaces and generates the Web Service Description Language files, which describe the capabilities of the Web service. It all runs on Windows 2000 using a variety of dual and quad servers from Dell.

The catalog Web service includes four functions: It can return a list of products by family code or by category code, and return a technical data sheet for a specific product. The fourth function is the creation of an Extensible Stylesheet Language stylesheet for data presentation on the end user's side.

"We had these COM+ interfaces that you could call from inside the firewall using standard COM+ technology," Pleasant says. "But to open it up to our customers we had to be able to move outside of our firewall. And that is where Web services makes a big change."

Also key is that all those Web services components can be reused in other applications, something not possible with COM+, he says.

Programming flexibility also was a plus because Eastman has committed to Java for its Web-based environment but often uses Microsoft tools for internal application development. Pleasant used WebMethod's Java tool kit to create the Web services that call for the COM+ objects Eastman built using Microsoft's Visual Studio development tools.

While Pleasant is impressed by the potential of Web services, he's starting slowly because of the technology's limitations regarding security, transactional integrity and nonrepudiation.

So while Eastman will develop and run its own Web services, it is using a hosted middleware service from Grand Central Communications, which validates Web services users and logs their transactions. (Grand Central's service starts at \$150,000 per year, though the company has not yet determined the number of Web services or connections Eastman will use.)

Pleasant prefers for someone else to be responsible for authentication services because it is not an Eastman forte and it insulates the chemical company from the evolution of security standards and identity-management systems such as Microsoft's Passport and the Liberty Alliance Project started by Sun. Grand Central also provides authorization services that feature a Web-based application that Eastman uses to manage who has access to what and when on its network.

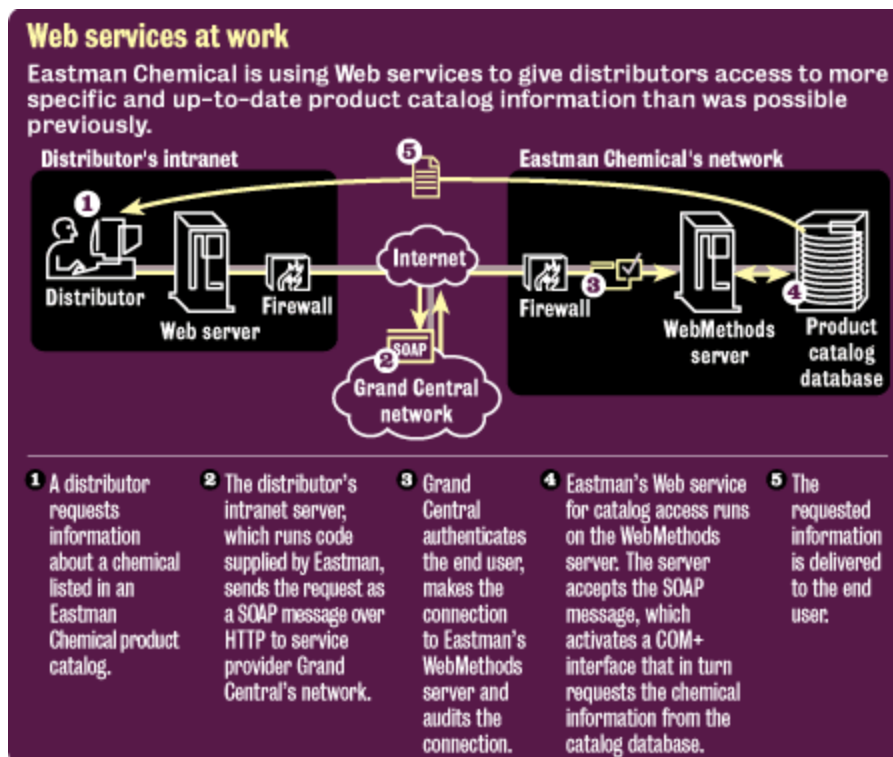
"We want Grand Central to take care of the volatility we expect to see around security," Pleasant says.

"We want them to worry about the maturation of the standards," he adds. And there are other services that Pleasant needs.

"As you do more complex transactions, especially multiparty transactions, this business of keeping track of whose system said what and when is pretty important. Grand Central has those kinds of nonrepudiation services. When a transaction does break and you need to do a postmortem, having an independent third party to do that is really, really important," he says.

While it's easy to get carried away with the potential of Web services, Pleasant says Eastman is right about where he'd like to see it in terms of adoption.

"One of the things that I keep telling people is we are not late to this party," he says. "We are fashionably early."



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