

### Service station chain is always up-to-date with WS\_FTP

**P**opular pumping station chain Agip (an acronym for Azienda Generale Italiana Petroli), traces its roots back to the time when automobiles first became a common sight in Southern Europe. The bright yellow Agip service stations are a familiar sight not only in the Italian homeland, but also in other countries, especially in Austria.

Agip Austria plays an important role within the Agip group. One of Europe's most heavily traveled transit routes, the magnificent Brenner Pass mountain turnpike, crosses the southern parts of Austria. Tourists and winter sports aficionados swell the ranks of motorists keeping fuel demand at service stations at peak levels. It goes without saying that no shortages can ever be tolerated, whether of fuel or of other products. This is why Agip Austria decided in 2000 to integrate its ordering and inventory management system with the central SAP application at company headquarters.

"Up until now, all our ordering and requisitioning processes were fax-based," reports Heinrich Haltmeyer, engineer and project manager for Agip Austria's Information and Communication Technology Group. "However, with our broadening range of products and rising demand, this system became too cumbersome in the long run, requiring us to come up with a new and more manageable concept. Moreover, the service stations themselves were already using electronic inventory control and planning systems — so having to update data manually seemed entirely out of synch with the times."

Agip was one of the first oil companies to implement the Service Station Retailing System (SSR) based on SAP R/3 4.6 for pricing and bookkeeping management at service stations. "Our project was based on the idea of exchanging sales and inventory data directly with this SAP system," says Haltmeyer. "We also wanted to implement a solution that fit in with the existing proven system. Right from the start we were concentrating all our attention on standardized products in order to keep our own programming and customization efforts to a minimum."

Agip Austria's headquarters and its data processing center for Austria are both located in Vienna. However, the inventory control and planning system for all of Europe is controlled from and hosted in Munich, Germany. Approximately 180 service stations need to be able to exchange data with the central processing site. They are connected with frame relay links with bandwidths of 64 kbps.

Agip looked at WS\_FTP Server from Ipswitch to provide a solution. With WS\_FTP, communication is bidirectional. Both the inventory control software and the checkout counter software create a number of files, either automatically or on manual request by the user. This data is stored in a special folder on the server for collection via FTP. At regular intervals, the central computer at headquarters will start FTP client processes collecting all the pertinent files from all the service stations. There are normally two to four of these files to be collected, with a typical size of approximately 10 kilobytes. Data is collected each time a new shift begins and each time the daily balance process is run on the checkout-counter system.



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Data transmission in the opposite direction works in pretty much the same way. Employees at headquarters work directly in SAP SSR. Price changes result in a command file being generated. This command file is then uploaded to a directory on the service station's server. The checkout counter process regularly checks the content of this directory. If it finds a command file, it reads this file and enters the data found directly in its local database. For service stations already equipped with this feature, any price updates are automatically reflected by the service station's roadside and pump price displays. Older systems use a message window on the checkout counter display screen to inform employees of any price changes mandated by headquarters.

"This solution is completely transparent to our users at the various service stations," said Haltmeyer. "People were more than happy to get away from having to copy down figures from faxes. Our decision in favor of WS\_FTP products was motivated by their excellent cost-benefit ratio."

But there was also another incentive to choose Ipswitch as a supplier. "With us, Ipswitch's products had a good reputation anyway. We have been using Ipswitch's WhatsUp Gold management tool for monitoring servers and services within our network — with excellent results."

One of the main reasons for Agip to search for a quick response to the challenge of handling sales data was the changing nature of the customer-supplier relationship with the individual service stations. Haltmeyer explains: "Our service stations used to be independent tenants with sole responsibility for their inventory, whether on the shelves or in the fuel tanks. Today, however, fuel is sold under an agency system, and Agip has taken on a lot of added responsibilities for logistics. This is why the data obtained must be as up-to-date as possible."

The WS\_FTP solution has been working to the complete satisfaction both of Agip and of the service station staff. Although the software used is a standard software product, the result is tailor-made for Agip's requirements. "WS\_FTP Server was the ideal product for our needs, and it does exactly what we need it to do," said Haltmeyer. "For Agip Austria, WS\_FTP Server is a mission-critical solution that is both reliable and flexible."

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