

## Vertex Services Improves Global Understanding with Tableau



HEADQUARTERS:  
NORWALK, CT

KEY REGIONAL OFFICES:  
HONG KONG  
SHANGHAI  
KUALA LUMPUR  
SEOUL  
SAO PAULO  
MONTREAL  
LONDON

ANSWERS

2 WKS

FASTER

2 YRS

OF ADVERTISING DATA  
ACCESSIBLE TO USERS

100S

OF TOP CUSTOMER'S QUESTIONS  
ANSWERED ON-THE-FLY

Vertex Services (Vertex), a worldwide distributor of flooring products, wanted to improve internal communication, speed time-to-insight and enable more data-driven decision-making across its company.

Vertex manufactures its high-quality flooring products in Asia and distributes its wares throughout North America, Europe, Asia, and South America, Africa, and Australia, Vertex is using Tableau to accomplish those goals while also improving understanding of and relationships with one of its top customers, The Home Depot.

### To Pull It All Together Has Been A Challenge

As a truly worldwide company—Vertex has operations in every continent except Antarctica—the company struggled with accessing and sharing the data stored in disparate sources.

“This is a rather diverse group,” explains Edmund Lai, CFO, Vertex Services.

“And we operate through a number of individually-owned companies. So it’s a vast network of entities spanning various regions.”

The company does not have a centralized data warehouse, but rather diverse, discrete applications located across the globe. Many systems, including accounting and order processing were duplicated or split between the US and Hong Kong offices.

Vertex also operates a number of different portals through which partners share data; data from this partner portal was maintained in its own discrete database.

“To pull it all together to start understanding and using the data has been a challenge,” Lai says.

Understandably, this also added time to the decision-making process.

“When the management in the US looked for numbers generated from Asia, we had to deal with the time difference issue. Also we had to wait for the number crunchers to take up all the information and process it, and make it in a meaningful way to present. And that often may take one or two days,” Lai explains. “When you have a decision where you want a rapid thing or users have a small thing that you want to check on, to wait for two days is too long.”

### It’s Going to Take Time

Another challenge is that the primary analytics and reporting tool for the company was Microsoft Excel.



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—Edmund Lai, CFO, Vertex Services

“Excel reports are static,” says Lou Smith, National Accounts Senior Manager. “I know I could hand my boss a pivot table with a bunch of numbers and he’ll understand what I’m trying to tell him—but it’s going to take a little bit of time.”

Lai agrees, saying “The people we are talking to are decision-makers in the organization. When we had them look at the Excel spreadsheet, the first thing they would say is, ‘Can you make it simple and make it appear on one sheet of paper?’ And sometimes it’s just impossible to present a summary with its full glory in one sheet of paper using Excel.”

Excel also did not lend itself to the iterative questioning process that leads to true insight. As a result, often decisions were made based on assumptions or educated guesses.

Smith often ran into this issue when looking at performance data in reference to Vertex’s largest customer, The Home Depot. Smith compiled two years’ worth of Home Depot advertising information to help answer some of these questions, but sharing that information with his colleagues was hit-or-miss.

Another Home Depot-specific issue that Smith faced was preparing for the yearly manager’s meeting.

“They walk around by district and everybody wants to know how they’re doing. ‘How am I doing this year? Am I doing better than this other store?’”

Smith could request Vertex product sales data from Home Depot and analyze it in an Excel spreadsheet—but

that would take days of effort. And he knew that Excel would be an unwieldy tool for trying to answer on-the-spot questions at the meeting.

Lai and his team had been considering finding a new BI solution when The Home Depot announced that it would begin sharing sales data with its vendors.

Vertex understood the strategic value of that sales data. “It helps us make decisions for what we’re going to suggest to The Home Depot, and for where we should be moving our business,” says Smith.

Now the search for a BI solution began in earnest.

### **We Can Form a Meaningful Picture of Things that We Have Done**

Vertex began its search by looking at the traditional enterprise players.

“Our consultants were recommending the standard software, like ‘Oh, maybe you want to look at Oracle, maybe you want to look at SAP or IBM Cognos,’” says Lai. “And I said, ‘If I had that much budget, that would be great. But to start people getting more interested I need something which has a much lower barrier for us to get over that hurdle.’”

Vertex next considered Microsoft, but quickly realized it would be too difficult to use for most of the Vertex users.

“Microsoft came in and said, ‘Okay, we can actually use SharePoint and Excel and start doing a lot more with your data,’” Lai recalls. “But the thing is—to get it to the simplicity and the quick responsiveness we needed, it



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takes a lot of skill. And that skill level may not be present right now within our organization. I know I can buy it, I can hire somebody to do it, but to have people using a more simple solution... that's what we needed.”

Vertex's IT contractor in Hong Kong suggested that they take a look at Tableau. Lai and his team quickly realized they found their BI solution.

“At the end we chose Tableau because of its ease of application, its nimbleness, and really—it is just very simple to use,” says Lai.

Vertex purchased its first Tableau Desktop licenses in June of 2012.

“Our first goal was the crack the diversity of our data and to try to manage it in a meaningful way, so that we can start analyzing it,” says Lai.

“Regularly now, we pull over 100,000 lines of data from various databases and blend it together. And we can form a meaningful picture of things that we have done in the past 18 to 24 months.”

Lai's team is now working to create a data queue for its wholesale order processing system.

Today, the Asian offices of Vertex have two consistent Tableau authors; in the U.S., Smith is the primary Tableau author. All authors create packaged workbooks for Vertex leadership, who consume the visualizations using the free Tableau Reader application. They are also beginning to share analytics with some customers, including The Home Depot.

Smith and Lai expect these numbers to grow after Vertex implements Tableau Server, a project which has already begun.

In addition, Lai is working on a project to integrate Tableau with the Vertex SharePoint site.

Many of the Vertex leaders use mobile devices to consume the packaged workbooks. “That was one of the things I liked about Tableau when I first started hearing about it,” says Smith. “I know I build my workbooks with that in mind: ‘I want to be able to make this so that you can read this on an iPad.’”

## **We Have A New Way of Communicating**

Lai and Smith agree that their use of Tableau is helping to enable more data-driven decisions within Vertex.

“As a globally-dispersed company, to have one set of data and be able to manipulate it so that it fits in more views is allowing us to have a new way of communicating,” says Lai. “Rather than looking at different reports created for different people, today we have one set of data with different views. We can see the same thing and actually refer to the same underlying issues.”

Users now can focus on their particular areas while also gaining insight into other parts of the business that they might not have understood as well in the past.

“I never really looked at the financial side of company. And Edmund, he may not have been as engaged as what happens at a Home Depot store



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level,” says Smith. “So now it gives us a chance to tie those together.”

This also offers a time savings benefit.

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Lai estimates that users are getting answers from days to two weeks faster, depending on the question.

### **At the Manager’s Meeting, We Blew Them Away**

One of the most satisfying wins for Smith is the response he received to his Tableau visualizations at the Home Depot manager’s meeting this past year.

“We absolutely blew them away. We could tell them what they had in their store, we could tell them what they did for any time period, all the way down to the SKU level,” Smith recalls. “There was not a question they could ask that we could not answer.”

He estimates that trying to create a report in Excel that would have allowed similar insight would have taken weeks or even months.

“It would have been very time-intensive to build it,” says Smith. “With Tableau, I just create a hierarchy and sort SKUs into categories. Then I can click on that category and it will tell me every SKU in the category by store. I could have all that data in Excel, but I would not have been able to access it as quickly as I did or answer questions as quickly as I did.”

### **It Brought Home the Message... and Made It A More Pleasant Conversation**

Interactive Tableau dashboards and visualizations are allowing Vertex management to have more productive discussions.

The ability to drill down to the underlying data, says Lai, “allows us to go down to the root cause a lot easier, a lot quicker,” says Lai.

This is also saving time for Vertex leadership. “We can have interactive discussions and when we are discussing issues we can go through the data and instantly—rather than asking for somebody else or asking for the data and waiting for it to come back—instantly we have that feedback of ‘This is what we want,’” says Lai. “With Tableau, the answer just jumps out from the data. It’s almost as if it’s telling us some story.”

Lai recalls a specific conversation in which one of these “jumps” occurred. “Recently we had a discussion with an executive vice president of Home Depot about the supply chain; we have got a highly volatile and fluctuating demand and supply situation,” says Lai.

The team created a visualization of the supply situation over time. The CEO of Vertex took the visualization to the executive vice president of Home Depot to drive home the message about the volatility of the supply situation.

“We chose to use Tableau; that made the story much, much more powerful because you can actually see the highs



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and the lows,” says Lai. “It brought home the message that we wanted to tell Home Depot. And having that interactivity and the simple presentation made it a much, much more pleasant conversation.”

### **It Really Has Been Eye-Opening for Me**

“Now we have got a set of data which talks back to us to say, ‘Hey, guys, look: this is the real pattern,’ or ‘The answer is not what you thought,’” says Lai. “That really changed the scenario. And it actually draws a lot of other users, gets them interested in what we are doing.”

Tableau’s interactivity, says Lai, is a big part of the reason that users are so receptive to the data visualizations and to the story being told.

For example, Smith says that the ad data that he has collected for two years is being more effectively used now that he has included that information in a Tableau visualization. The visualization can be sorted by country and date. When a user clicks on a specific advertising date, an image of the actual ad that ran can be viewed.

“Having the ad information in Tableau is much more visual, and it makes more sense to people. It’s more accessible. It’s not just me saying, ‘Oh, the Yukon oak was advertised that month.’ You can click on the visualization and you can see the ad. And people are more apt to use it,” he says.

“I use Tableau. I look at it every day. It’s really made me think differently about my job,” he explains.