

Sports data from STATS appears on mobile applications, websites, television, and more—but the firm lacked a presence in the consumer market, especially the global consumer market. Executives thought that the cost of entry was prohibitive and the risks high. Then they learned about the DataMarket section of the Windows Azure Marketplace. DataMarket is a part of the Windows Azure platform that offers data, imagery, and real-time web services from leading commercial data providers and authoritative public data sources. By participating in DataMarket, STATS is extending its reach to millions of new customers worldwide; gaining a flexible, low-cost way to enter its desired market; reducing its investment cost by at least U.S.\$1 million over the cost of building its own consumer infrastructure; and avoiding the need to build and maintain its own billing infrastructure and fulfillment service.



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SITUATION

From the sports statistics delivered to your mobile phone, to the electronic “crawl” of scores moving across the screen of a sports broadcast, you’ll find information that originated with STATS. The company provides real-time scores, historical information, and turnkey fantasy sports operations to teams, leagues, and federations; sports broadcast production companies; cable and satellite networks; interactive television; broadband, wireless, and Internet operators; game developers and fantasy sports providers; and print media and wire services.

What these customers have in common is that they all represent business-to-business channels for STATS. The company licenses its content to customers who either use it directly or repackage the content to present to consumers. STATS has not had a presence in the business-to-consumer market.

“The consumer market represents a tremendous business opportunity for us,” says Greg Kirkorsky, Senior Vice President for the Americas, STATS. “There are consumers around the world who aren’t yet exposed to our content. They lack the bandwidth and the financial backing that our current business clients have—they are a very different market for us. But we knew that reaching them could bring our business to an entirely new level.”

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SOLUTION

When STATS executives learned about DataMarket, they recognized that the cloud service offered an effective route into the global consumer market for sports data. The more they learned about DataMarket, the more interested they became.

DataMarket provides a global marketplace for information including data, imagery, real-time web services, and analytics. As a content provider, STATS can make selected databases available through DataMarket, where consumers, enterprise customers, developers, and aggregators can preview and license them. DataMarket makes it possible for content providers such as STATS to grow their businesses by reaching millions of customers otherwise beyond their reach.

Content providers have a choice of storing their data for DataMarket in the Windows Azure platform, their own data centers, or third-party cloud services. The marketplace provides a complete billing infrastructure that scales smoothly from occasional queries to heavy traffic. DataMarket hosts trusted public domain and premium data from industry-leading content providers, including Dun & Bradstreet, Lexis Nexis, and NAVTEQ.

Sasman, Vice President of Commercial Products at STATS. "SQL Azure gave us complete flexibility to make the best technical decisions regarding our data. It also provided the greatest ease of implementation for DataMarket. We know that with SQL Azure, we're getting guaranteed scalability, reliability, and performance—factors that are essential for a smooth entry into a new market."

Sasman and his colleagues tested SQL Azure to make sure that it would receive data updates from the STATS data centers and turn them around for presentation in DataMarket—and do so with virtually no latency over performance of the STATS data centers alone. "When you're promising updates to consumers in real time, your database can't be a bottleneck," says Sasman. "SQL Azure and DataMarket provide the fast, real-time live updates we need—there are no bottlenecks."

Sasman and Kirkorsky are enthusiastic about the options that STATS has with DataMarket and Microsoft technologies to make its data available to consumers.

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The technology staff at STATS worked with Microsoft to define the sports data sets that STATS intended to expose and the data structures for supporting that information. Microsoft also provided guidance on using the pricing and invoicing infrastructure that is built into Windows Azure Marketplace. STATS chose to enter DataMarket with databases that it selected for their broad appeal to the consumer market. They include databases on game-by-game and year-to-date statistics, as well as live scores, for baseball and football.

Although STATS has its own data centers, it chose to host the databases for DataMarket in Microsoft SQL Azure, the cloud-based version of Microsoft SQL Server data management software. "SQL Azure looked like a great option to complement the decision to enter Windows Azure Marketplace," says John

"Anyone with a spreadsheet can link up with our data—but that's just the beginning," says Sasman. He cites the ability of consumers to use STATS data with any Microsoft graphing, charting, or visualization tools they already have. They can use any new data tools that Microsoft makes available for DataMarket customers. STATS is building its own visualization products and it could make those available to customers through DataMarket. There is also the potential for mash-ups with other content providers on DataMarket, and for partnerships with independent software developers who want to build STATS data into their applications and offer the results to DataMarket customers.

"All of these possibilities add up to the inevitability that DataMarket will change the way people consume our data," says Kirkorsky.



BENEFITS

By launching its consumer-oriented data services on DataMarket, STATS extended its reach to vast numbers of new customers around the world; gained a flexible way to enter a new market while minimizing its investment; reduced its investment cost by U.S.\$1 million over what it would have spent to build its own consumer infrastructure; and avoided the requirement to create and manage its own billing infrastructure and fulfillment service.

Extends Reach to Millions of Customers Worldwide

For STATS, one of the biggest benefits of DataMarket is the opportunity it provides to reach millions of potential customers that the company would not be able to reach on its own, including fans of specific teams, fantasy sports participants, and independent software developers. Part of that greater reach comes from the technology behind DataMarket—but another part comes from decidedly nontechnological advantages.

“DataMarket gives us the ability to reach millions of consumers in part because of the reputations of its participants, and the vast audiences that will be attracted to DataMarket because of those reputations,” says Kirkorsky. “The Microsoft name is known and respected around the world, so DataMarket will have a level of credibility that we won’t easily see with any other data marketplace that arises in the cloud. We feel it gives us our best shot at entering the global consumer marketplace for data.”

Enables Flexible, Low-Cost Market Entry

Sasman and Kirkorsky also point to the ability that STATS now has, through DataMarket, to enter the global data market in what they call “a nonthreatening way.”

“DataMarket is the perfect way for STATS to test the waters of this new market,” says Sasman. “We can put an offering up on DataMarket, adjust the pricing for that specific dataset, tweak the product, and then continue to roll it out or replace it with something else—all without having to build the infrastructure or maintain the systems it would

take for us to do this on our own. So, the cost of discovering how to perfect our offerings for this market will be low. DataMarket is really the only opportunity for us to do what we’re trying to do in the consumer market.”

Saves \$1 Million on Investment Cost

If STATS attempted to serve the global consumer market for sports data without participating in DataMarket, the cost of the investment to the company would rise by at least \$1 million, Kirkorsky estimates. That increased investment starts with the need to build out its data centers to meet anticipated capacity needs. Beyond meeting immediate needs, STATS would also have to build additional capacity fairly quickly so that it could scale seamlessly when required.

In addition to capital investment, STATS would incur ongoing labor costs for system maintenance. To replicate the business model that makes DataMarket highly cost-effective, STATS would have to build a customer self-service mechanism to avoid high-customer touch during both presales and postsales interactions. It would also need to invest in systems and personnel for a consumer-facing billing infrastructure that it hasn’t needed until now.

“We simply couldn’t do this without DataMarket,” says Kirkorsky. “The costs would be too high.”

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Provides Billing Infrastructure, Fulfillment Service

Another advantage, according to the STATS executives, is the billing infrastructure that comes with participation in DataMarket. The billing infrastructure means that STATS doesn't need its own custom billing and invoicing system. Instead, STATS has immediate access to the DataMarket system, with Microsoft performing the fulfillment. DataMarket tracks all customer access and reports are always available.

STATS has the flexibility to create different subscription models for each of its data sets—for example, it can create a free subscription that provides partial access and a premium subscription with full data access.

"DataMarket is far more than a cloud hosting environment for commercially available databases," says Sasman. "The billing infrastructure is one example of the depth of services that content providers get with it. We don't know of anyone else who's doing this. For our money, DataMarket is an opportunity apart—and we intend to take full advantage of it."

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