



Sentences™ Case Study

The Alumni System of the College of St Mark & St John

A case study demonstrating the flexibility, power and speed of implementation using the Associative Model of Data™ from Lazysoft.

- **Lazysoft delivered 90 percent solution in two days**
- **One member of staff maintains the system in one hour per week**
- **“Answering questions we couldn’t have hoped to answer using a relational database system”**

The Need for a Formal Approach to Alumni

The higher education College of St Mark & St John, or ‘Marjon’ at it is known, was founded in 1840 and has been turning out its fair share of distinguished alumni over its significant 160 year history. The college was founded by the Church of England and was based in Chelsea until 1973 when it moved to its current location in Plymouth. It has always been funded from a variety of sources; however, with the changes in the higher education funding over the last five years it became obvious that the college had to get smarter about promoting itself.

With that purpose in mind a formal alumni department was set up by Martin Holst, a former Mathematics lecturer of the college. For many years there had been a Marjon Club run by the former students, however, it had not been successful in recruiting new members. Holst saw the potential for identifying alumni who would be pleased to assist in the financial support and promotion of the College.

A System to Replace the Spreadsheet

Holst initially worked with a relatively small list of former students, mainly from the Marjon Club. This was supplemented with a home-made database importing addresses from the central college database. When this solution was

outgrown, the next step was to use an Excel spreadsheet. However, as the department’s efforts bore fruit and the number registered alumni grew, the need for a formal alumni computer system became evident, and the hunt was on to find a system to replace the spreadsheet.

The department’s objectives were defined as follows:

- To engender a feeling of continuous belonging to the college for past alumni, and to keep alumni interested and informed of the colleges news and new courses to encourage recruitment of students
- To enable past alumni to contact each other, and to facilitate contact with famous alumni.
- To encourage continued loyalty to the college by running innovative alumni events directed by geographical area, subjects studied, and attendance years.

Sentences: A 90% Solution in Two Days

With the assistance of the College’s IT department, a number of options were considered. Purpose-built alumni and fund-raising systems were reviewed, but they were either not flexible enough or too expensive. “Despite our limited resources, we were about to embark on writing an in-house system, when our Alumni Officer, Krystyna Roberts, heard of Sentences by Lazysoft” remarked Frank Clements, Marjon’s head of IT. “We gave Lazysoft a call on Wednesday lunchtime and organised a visit for that Friday afternoon. They asked for a copy of the system requirements, and, to our amazement, on Friday they demonstrated a 90% solution which they had created from scratch since our call on Wednesday”.

Clements goes on to say, “The principles on which the associative model of data is based, the ability

for the users to see the schema, and most importantly for us the lack of maintenance time that would be required for a system that by its very nature was going to change radically and often, suited the alumni system requirements perfectly”.

The associative model of data is the first new database architecture since the advent of the Internet, and the only model to take account of its unique needs. It offers a scalable alternative to the relational model of data.

Sentences is the first commercial implementation of the associative model of data, the first database architecture designed to reflect the structure of data in the real world and the way that our brains perceive and process information.

Up and Running in Weeks

Once the decision had been made to go ahead with Lazysoft, it was only a matter of weeks before the system was up and running, with two days on site training completed and the existing data imported into the new system.

“And therein lay a problem” said Roberts. “With Sentences, the correctness of the data, or not as the case maybe, rather hits you in the face. Our data was considerably more incomplete, duplicated, or incorrect in places than we had realised and we have spent many hours getting it up to date. Our data is the most valuable thing we own – it has to be right”.

“The system has been in daily use since its inception three years ago and proved invaluable for managing the communications and responses to our wonderfully successful Marjon Alumni Events which are held in June every year.” says Roberts. It’s the availability of the schema to the user via the power user interface that Roberts particularly likes. She states “With Sentences, it’s remarkably easy to find an alumnus in the system from the smallest piece of data, like a post code or even a partial telephone number”.

No Burden on the College IT Department

For the IT department the system has provided huge benefits at little on-going cost. Clements says “Sentences is very intuitive to use, such that the Alumni Department are practically self sufficient with it.”

Department staff can easily create their own queries or use standard queries supplied with the system to produce contact lists or analyse responses and have no trouble in maintaining, adding to and embellishing the system. This autonomy reduces on-going costs. Users can also harness the power of Microsoft Excel to produce effective visual representation of statistical information. Marjon’s Alumni team found that using Sentences Alumni meant “in addition to alumni work, we are now able to provide answers to questions from the college administration which we couldn’t have hoped to answer using existing packaged Alumni software”.
