

# NEWSPAPERS & TECHNOLOGY

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## Simplifying the tangled Web of data collection

By Hays Goodman  
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Newspapers are searching for new tools to manage the torrent of user information flowing to their Web sites.

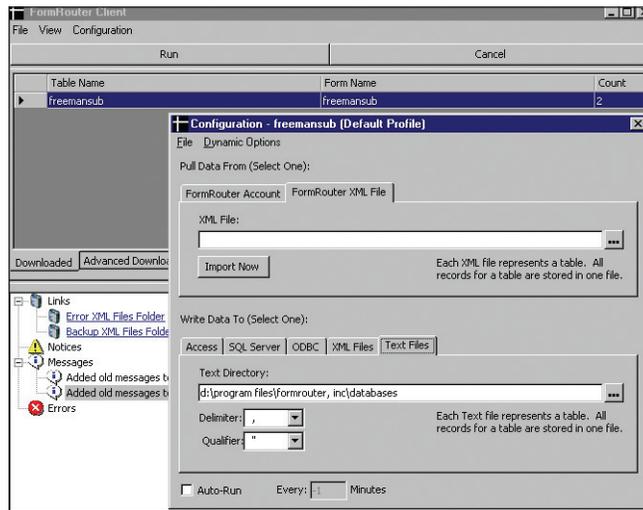
Letters to the editor, feedback to writers and subscription management are only a few of the dozen interactions subscribers have on a regular basis with newspapers.

This requires newspapers to repurpose the data, ensuring that information is funneled to the appropriate departments.

Presumably, data managers would prefer to write this information to databases or XML files. But they may not have the programming and technical resources available to do that on a consistent basis.

Enter FormRouter. The Cary, N.C., firm has developed an eponymous app, that lets newspapers collect data without requiring additional programming (see sidebar).

The News & Observer in Raleigh, N.C., (daily, 163,769; Saturday, 180,774; Sunday, 208,769) deployed FormRouter last spring to oversee such varied functions as managing circulation and allowing readers to sign up for special events, said Daniel Williams, subscriber services manager.



Graphic: FormRouter

The FormRouter client runs as a compact desktop application and connects to the FormRouter service to download data, text or XML files to databases.

A McClatchy promotion, called Kids Day, helped prove FormRouter's worth, Williams said. "It's a promotion where once a year we print a copy of the newspaper that sells for \$1, and 75 percent of the proceeds go towards a local children's hospital. This year we sold 144,600 newspapers," he said.

Roughly 85 percent of those copies

are presold, meaning that businesses ideally needed some way of signing up to receive a certain number of copies for that particular charity effort.

### No way to manage

Before rolling out FormRouter, The News & Observer had no way to automate the sign-up process, either for presales or for bulk sales performed by representatives working the streets.

The deployment of FormRouter changed all that. The app let The News & Observer enable businesses to register online, thus freeing staff to allocate more of its resources toward promotion and less toward manual data entry.

"For someone like me, who's not real technically skilled in programming, it's great," Williams said. "We know we have a need and we know how we want the need fulfilled online, but now we can take care of it directly by going through a fairly easy step-by-step process. That's what makes it so effective."

Next up, Williams wants to bridge the gap between FormRouter and the AMC

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### Navigating FormRouter

As the name implies, FormRouter takes data from online forms and routes it to dedicated servers where it is collected before the information is subsequently downloaded and processed by users at their desktop.

FormRouter can crunch the data in a variety of ways, converting it either to a delimited text file or straight XML file, or writing directly into Microsoft Access or another ODBC-compatible database.

The strength of the program is best shown in this last method of data handling: The database does not have to be created ahead of time, which allows for swift form development. If, for example, the user specifies that the data should be written to a Microsoft Access database, the FormRouter desktop client will automatically create a table with the correct number of columns and rows, ready for import.

Jim Healy, FormRouter's

chief technology officer, said the app's .NET foundation lets the software scale to meet users' needs, regardless of volume.

.NET, developed by Microsoft, lets applications share information with other software packages via a network of Internet-based services, which are small building-block apps that can connect to each other or to other larger programs.

"We've really designed this software and service to work together to absolutely ensure against the loss of data," he

said. "Just like most e-mail applications, you always have the option to leave a copy of the data on our server. So typically you have one copy residing there, one copy downloading to your database, and then you can also run an archival copy off as a flat XML file. Then if your local database copy would become damaged or corrupt, you can just re-import the XML data."

Healy also said that some clients have chosen to set up two accounts with FormRouter, but using the

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circulation management software The News & Observer currently uses. Because the apps don't mesh with each other, Williams cobbled a framework that calls for a system administrator to transfer FormRouter data from an Access database to the AMC app.

Williams said he hopes the integration issue will be solved once The News & Observer switches over to Publishing Business Systems' circulation software.

"I'm not holding my breath," but the ideal solution would be for PBS' apps to import FormRouter's data directly, Williams said.▲

### **FormRouter**

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same data: One account receives data in dribs and drabs from an online form and is downloaded on a regular schedule. The other account receives the exact same data but is treated as a master archival copy that can always be used as a backup.

### **Options available**

Healy said FormRouter engineers are working to enhance the integration between the software and Microsoft Outlook. That would enable a user to submit a form online and also upload a JPEG image to accompany the form, such as for an online obituary or advertisement.

An administrator at the newspaper would "subscribe" to a FormRouter account using Outlook. The data would then stream down into Outlook in a batch,

with those uploaded JPEGs appearing as attachments in e-mails.

Alternatively, the pictures could be routed to an appropriate watched folder for image processing while the accompanying data goes to a database.

FormRouter's price depends upon the number of users accessing the client. The app is priced at an annual cost of \$2,500 per user for deployments of between one and five users. It's priced at an annual cost of \$2,000 per user where it's rolled out to between six and 25 users.

FormRouter also offers a FastTrack service in which it will host a single form online for up to a three-month period for \$250, plus a one-time fee for building the form that will vary with the form's complexity.▲

— Hays Goodman