Furniture Brands' Lacey Griffith says the company has decreased its disaster-recovery expenses by 50 percent.

A Comfortable Place

By Jim Utsler ✦ Photography by Forrest MacCormack

Furniture Brands
rests easier with SecureAgent's backup and recovery solution

More than a few people subscribe to the keep-it-simple philosophy. But unfortunately, complexity is sometimes an unavoidable part of life.

When one company acquires another, for example, the overall business is likely to benefit, but the IT department can be stretched to its limits with an incompatible IT infrastructure. This can wreak havoc, due to disparate backup designs that must be handled platform by platform.

Furniture Brands International faced this exact issue. Over the years, the company has grown tremendously, due largely to acquisitions. The company grew stronger in its industry with more products to offer, but became burdened with a heterogeneous back-end operating environment that included both IBM System z* servers and Power Systems* servers running IBM i.

Because these inherited platforms used different backup mechanisms, the company struggled to ensure it could bring its systems up again quickly in the event of an emergency. This isn't to say it couldn't, but the process was cumbersome, expensive and time-intensive.

With that keep-it-simple philosophy in mind, the organization sought a solution that would back up both its System z and Power* platforms in a single stroke. Although such cross-platform solutions are difficult to come by, the company was undeterred.

After speaking with a longtime and trusted business partner, DG Technology Consultants, Furniture Brands found exactly what it was looking for: SecureAgent's Secure Data Solution (SDS). This platform-agnostic middleman device now lets the company back up both its mainframe and Power systems with little hands-on intervention and has the added benefit of reducing tape, storage and personnel costs.

A Virtual Team

Anyone who's shopped for a sofa, chair or dining-room table is likely to have encountered Furniture Brands. Their brands include Thomasville, Drexel Heritage, Broyhill, Hickory Chair and Lane Furniture. Headquartered in St. Louis, the company caters to all types of customers, including interior designers, independent retailers and big-box stores. And its Thomasville line is sold at its company-owned Thomasville stores.

"We try to cover every potential customer, from individual purchasers to designers, said Lacey Griffith, Furniture Brands' director of IT enterprise applications. "Designers may go over everything we have to offer, so they might buy a sofa from one collection and an ottoman and wing chair from another. We work closely with them to make sure they get the best design for their clients."

The company designs all of its furniture and then either manufactures it internally or outsources it. In both cases, the final products are sent to one of several distribution centers and orders are fulfilled from there. Much of this activity is coordinated in St. Louis, but because of past acquisitions, the company also has facilities in Mississippi and North Carolina. Despite multiple locations, Griffith says the company works together as a "virtual team"; its operational data—whether coming from System z servers (a System z10* and a z890) or Power Systems servers running IBM i— is consolidated into a single data-warehousing environment.

"We have individual data residing on each system related to specific applications, and then we have a data-warehousing strategy in place that pulls specific data sets out for companywide reporting," Griffith says. "For example, we'll take our customer data and supplier data and consolidate that as a single resource so we can run reports from either a line perspective or a larger, overarching company perspective. This gives us the benefit of operating as one big company, despite being made up of smaller divisions."

Furniture Brands has two primary data centers at its Mississippi and North Carolina facilities. The former houses the z10 and the latter houses two z890s (one operational and the other dedicated for backups), and each hosts a Power Systems server, one for Thomasville to run its sales, distribution and manufacturing applications and the other to manage Lane's warehousing and distribution.

Initially, Furniture Brands acted as a holding company for its many acquired lines, and each of them acted independently with what Griffith describes as its "own procedures, policies, practices and business processes." When Furniture Brands decided to consolidate these business units and operate as a single company, it had to streamline its IT environment.

One of the biggest challenges was creating a unified backup policy for its many systems. Before turning to SecureAgent's SDS, the company was backing up to tape and either storing tapes onsite or contracting with an outside agent for vaulting. It also had contracts with hardware-service providers; in the event of a disaster, Furniture Brands would have to gather its tapes, take them to the offsite hardware locations and restore from there.

"This was a very complicated way of doing things, because we had multiple contracts with multiple vendors. Additionally, because our IT environment was so fragmented, we

didn't have a single disaster-recovery strategy in place," Griffith says. "Different locations, for example, would have different ways of doing things. This made us more than a bit nervous."

And that wasn't the end of the story. All of the various contracts with outside vendors were expensive to maintain, and the actual act of conducting the tape backups was time-intensive, beginning at night and sometimes going into the morning. As Griffith notes, "It seemed like we were spending more time rotating tapes and managing the data-backup window than actually enabling the business. We knew we had to do something to change this."

A Single Standard

Fortunately, the company's management and board of directors agreed. They saw disaster recovery as crucial to the business's long-term goals, both to protect the company should a disaster occur and to save money on its IT operations. For disaster recovery, the IT department thought it could completely recover within seven days, which might mollify the company's shareholders, but would not be quick enough to maintain day-to-day operations.

"We started looking at changing business conditions, especially as far as the recession was concerned, and decided seven days was a long time that

might result in lost revenue we couldn't make up," Griffith says. "So we looked at an improved disaster-recovery strategy as an insurance policy of sorts."

To get to this point, the company set a goal of coordinating its disaster-recovery procedures. This would allow it to draft a single disaster-recovery plan instead of many, depending on the platform with which it was working. For example, under the old approach, it might have one plan for the System z platform and another for its Power Systems platforms. Although this could improve backups and disaster recovery, it would still require someone to be familiar with both plans.

The company decided to reach out to DG Technology Consultants, which has an ongoing IT support relationship with Furniture Brands, to find a single solution for both IBM platforms. Finding the right tool was a tall order. Mirroring software, for example, will run on one platform but not the other.

"We didn't want one solution for the System z and another for Power," Griffith says. "That would have defeated the purpose. We wanted one standard for both the mainframe and Power environments."

Despite the challenge, DG Technology eventually found SecureAgent's platform-agnostic SDS backup appliance. Following a successful 30-day trial, Furniture Brands was confident it had found the tool for the job.

"After we went through the trial period, everyone was so impressed that it was clear we were headed in the right direction. In fact, I would've been afraid to take the SecureAgent solution away from our operations people, they loved it so much. It could've been dangerous," Griffith jokingly says.

The firm now has four SDS appliances, two at each of its data centers. One is hooked up to the z10 at the North Carolina site and another to a z890 at the Mississippi site, with the z10 backing up to the formerly unused z890 in Mississippi and the production z890 backing up to a partition on the z10. The same applies to the company's Power Systems servers, with one device backing up to the other and vice versa.

Acting as a virtual tape library, SDS controls backups by pushing data from one system to the other over a secure TCP/IP connection. That data is then backed up to disk rather than to tape. In the event of a disaster, operations can be brought up on the backup system much more quickly than the previous seven-day window.

"The recovery time is unbelievable," Griffith notes. "Before, if someone needed data, we'd have to find out what tape it was on, find that tape and then mount it. That might have taken 44 hours. Now, we can do it on the fly, with restore requests coming in at around 15 minutes."

Across-the-Board Savings

The benefits to the SecureAgent solution don't end there. Because backups no longer run at night, there's no need to staff the third shift to monitor the backups and swap out tapes. The organization moved the position to the

second shift, when most of the backups now occur, and staff can work on other, more productive efforts.

Furniture Brands has also reduced the number of tapes it's using. At its North Carolina data center, for example, it had about 6,500 tapes. Now it has virtually none, so there's no need to continue paying for tape-vaulting services—saving $16,000 annually.

Add to that other costs associated with disaster recovery, including tape purchases and third-party hardware hosting, and the firm has decreased its overall disaster-recovery expense by 50 percent, according to Griffith. And thanks to other IT-related cost-cutting measures, the company has lowered its total mainframe and Power budget from $1.6 million to $1.15 million.

Furniture Brands' keep-it-simple mindset has allowed it to enable other business-inspired innovations more proactively, thanks in no small part to freeing up personnel to work on other projects and having more cash on hand to support IT initiatives.

In fact, Griffith notes the Secure-Agent solution had an ROI of less than six months. "Our board was very happy about that, as well as with our new, much quicker disaster-recovery objectives," he says. **z**

Jim Utsler, *IBM Systems Magazine* senior writer, has been covering technology for nearly 20 years.