Urban Outfitters
Analyzes Customer Behavior with SEQUEL

By Barbara Davey

If you are an educated, urban-minded person in your 20s, there's a good chance you know and love Urban Outfitters. Founded in 1970, Urban Outfitters operates more than 130 stores in the United States, Canada, and Europe. Urban Outfitters is known for offering an eclectic blend of merchandise that reflects the interests of their customers in contemporary art, music, and fashion. It's a place for men and women to find things to wear and cool items for their apartments. Urban Outfitters prides itself on understanding its customers and connecting with them on an emotional level.

If you're an IT professional, you know this kind of connection with your customer isn't about being some kind of "touchy-feely" person. It requires sophisticated data mining to understand customer behavior.

At the corporate headquarters in Philadelphia, Tom Gould, an IT Business Analyst, says, "We're running our IT operations on IBM Power Systems™ running IBM i. Island Pacific [a leading merchandising and store operations solution] is our main ERP application. We're in the process of implementing a new order management system, which will be the front end, with Island Pacific as the back end."

Tom started his career in the accounting department at Urban Outfitters in 1989, but his love of teasing information out of the Island Pacific databases lead him to move into IT about ten years ago. Tom uses SEQUEL® data access and analysis software from SEQUEL Software™ to help him do his job and to create reports for Urban Outfitters' savvy buyers and merchandisers. Tom says, "I'm really more of an analyst than a programmer. I can read SQL, but I can't write it. But I can do all these queries and build reports with SEQUEL because SEQUEL generates the SQL for me.

"When SEQUEL switched from being all green screen to having a graphical user interface [SEQUEL ViewPoint®], I found it much easier to use. In fact, I now do some things that you might actually consider programming.

"I get a lot of requests from users for things that aren't just 'one-off' questions, but really are requests for reports. Rather than immediately turning these requests over to programming, which can be expensive and time consuming, I analyze what the user needs.
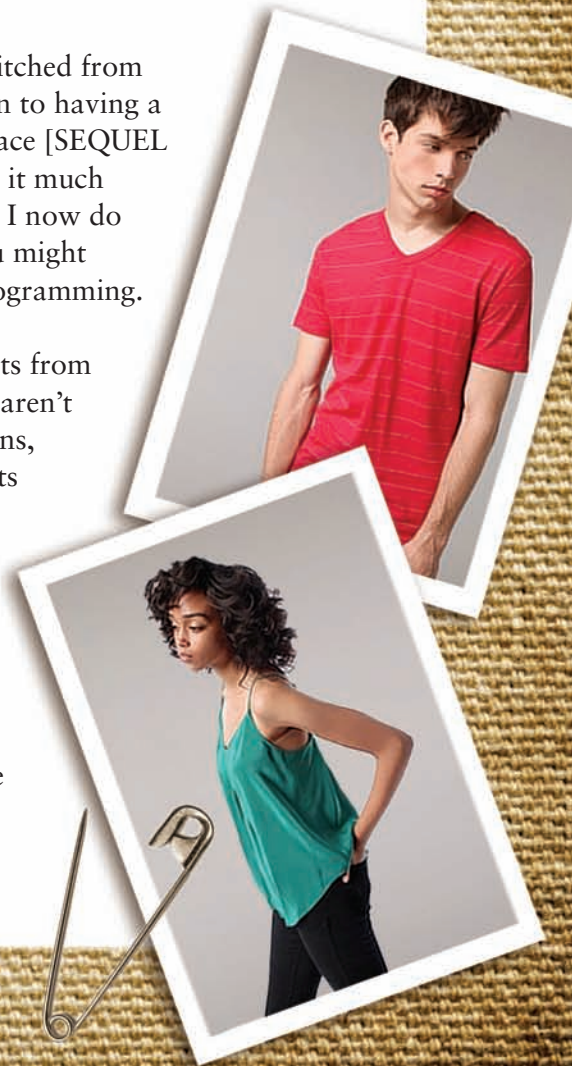
"If it's something I know I can throw together easily and put on an Island Pacific menu, I just handle it. In the last three weeks, I've probably written and published 15 reports that everyone is using. Lately, the report-writing aspect of my job is going strong since they've seen what I can do.

"The end result is that the users simply select a menu option, type in their variables [called run-time prompting in SEQUEL], and they've got the report. The menu option becomes a shortcut to a SEQUEL view [query], report, or script, and it saves the company time and money.

"Plus, I just recently learned from the wonderful SEQUEL Software Help Desk how to e-mail the resulting spooled file in Excel format. Users go into a menu option and the Excel report arrives in their mailbox. They just love it!"

Tom finds SEQUEL really helpful in his analysis work, too. He frequently uses SEQUEL to summarize data, create derived fields, and drill into results to see what's really happening. For example, Urban Outfitters sells directly to consumers online and accepts returns from these sales at its stores. Tom has been trying to figure out if that is a net benefit for the company. "I have a big report that I worked on for weeks—basically a direct return transaction report. It counted direct return transactions and total transactions. It calculated how many direct returns there are as part of our overall

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store sales. But, it went beyond that. It tells us how many sales there were within the same transaction. So we actually know if we're making money when somebody brings a direct return back to the store. We can figure out if they're buying something else at the store when they are there to make the return."

Urban Outfitters is also the company behind several newer brands, including Anthropologie, Free People, and Terrain. Each brand specializes in a particular customer segment and strives to create a store environment that is compelling and distinctive. For IT, this means that there are other retail applications, such as Manhattan, which runs on a different partition, and other servers such as MySQL and SQL in the mix.

In the future, Tom hopes to use SEQUEL to set up access to these remote databases and to combine data from multiple platforms and partitions to learn even more about each customer group. "When I first started working with SEQUEL, I went to Chicago for training and I've been learning on my own ever since. I'll probably end up working this [remote database access] through with one of the SEQUEL customer support reps. They've really helped me learn to use more features of SEQUEL over the years. I love the support and products!"

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