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BUSINESS INTELLIGENCE

General Ledger Vs. Major Opportunity

WHEN THE APPLE iPhone

became the must-have gadget among affluent technophiles last year, AT&T braced for the onslaught. As the exclusive U.S. carrier, it knew demand would be high, and it was: 4 million units sold in the first 200 days.

But AT&T knew more than that. Eighteen hours after the iPhone went on sale the company was able to report exactly how many iPhone customers it had, and by later this year it will have a 30-line P&L statement for every customer that will reveal just how profitable each one is.

If you guessed that such capabilities hinge on a sophisticated IT system, you're right. But what's notable about AT&T's approach is that it owes more to a strong partnership between finance and IT than to a massive embrace of new technology.

So tight is the partnership between finance and IT, in fact, that the system in question—a data warehouse built with software from Teradata—bears the finance seal of approval. Literally. Web pages that display the information are marked with an icon that reads “AT&T Mobility Finance—certified.”

The effort began shortly after the 2004 acquisition of AT&T by Cingular Wireless. “We doubled in



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size,” says Jerry Boerner, executive director of management reporting at the company (now named AT&T Mobility.) “We had to change our focus and look at every aspect of the business differently, especially customer data.” The company’s general-ledger system was viewed as the most reliable source of such data, but it couldn’t support the kinds of decision-support demands that were being placed on it.

So Boerner marshalled a team of data warehouse, business-intelligence, and portal experts. “We

already owned most of what we needed,” he says, a not-uncommon discovery in the corporate world. “We developed the new system on a shoestring by taking risks, delivering new capabilities in phases, and being honest with each other. No one played the blame game.” Had the system not been in place, Boerner estimates that AT&T would have had to spend more than \$1 million to accommodate the iPhone rollout. Instead, “the beauty of it was that it was a non-event for our team.” —S.L.

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