IBM

Business challenge

To plan cost-effective media campaigns and track new leads, Active International must analyze vast amounts of data. How could the company free its staff from hours of spreadsheet work to focus on strategic decision-making?

Transformation

Active International used the IBM Cloud to enhance its financial planning processes, develop a strategic prospecting application, and launch XACTV, a service that optimizes media buying. These solutions are helping the company expand into new markets.

Jay Santamaria
Chief of Staff
Active International

Business benefits:

USD 80m

in year-one estimated billing opportunities unlocked by enabling media optimization

Full ROI

achieved within months by optimizing highly complex media buying processes

100s of hours

saved for business development teams with AI-powered strategic prospecting

Active International
Growing client revenue through high-quality, targeted media campaigns

Active International focuses on helping its clients achieve more via a suite of business and financial solutions. With its roots in corporate trade, Active works with its technology partners to transform itself and continually adapt to the demands of the "what's next?" economy. Active is committed to providing the best quality products, services, resources, and solutions to help its clients and media providers achieve their business goals. At any given time, Active has thousands of contracts with partners across the full spectrum of media offerings, as well as an array of other categories that address its clients' daily operational needs.

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A new force in the media industry

For many companies, Active International's core solutions model provides a vital opportunity to exchange slow-moving, unwanted, or underutilized inventory for high-quality services. With 35 years of experience in corporate trade, the company is a recognized name in the industry and helps many organizations extract value from their assets.

Jay Santamaria, Chief of Staff at Active International, explains: "Active's expertise, which includes corporate trading and consultative work as well as financial business solutions, is all about helping companies create value and achieve more for their stakeholders. Our core trading model is asset-enabled media. Put another way, clients exchange their underperforming or undervalued assets for Active trade credits, which they can use to purchase anything from hotel rooms and airline tickets to logistics, security and telecommunications services and, of course, every variety of media."

"Media is a critical focus area for our business," adds Santamaria. "Our local media buying team was working day and night to meet demands and knit together what we in the trade call an 'unwired network'. We started looking for a way to scale our processes and take full advantage of technology to help us offer our advertisers cost-effective national coverage at aggregated local rates."

The media lifecycle involves numerous stages—planning, buying, executing, and measuring. At Active International, it begins with designing a bespoke package of media services for each client. The media team builds a detailed picture of the target demographic that the client is trying to reach and helps them set achievable goals for their campaigns.

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Jay Santamaria, Chief of Staff, Active International

Next, the team analyzes vast amounts of industry data to identify the media slots in Active International's inventory that align with each client's strategy. The team then places the ads and tracks their progress to make sure that the right content gets aired on the right channels at the right time.

Lou Petreski, Executive Vice President and CIO at Active International, explains: "Every stage of the media lifecycle is complex and decision-making requires a lot of expertise. At the same time, much of the work is very time-consuming and laborious—especially the process of efficiently allocating ads to slots. That's a bad combination from a scalability perspective. You can end up with your expert staff spending long hours on tedious spreadsheet work just to keep the show on the road."

The company also identified similar challenges in other areas. For example, business development directors were spending significant amounts of time sifting through thousands of news stories, company prospectuses, and other documents to identify new prospective clients. If this process could be automated, the business development team would free up hundreds of hours to spend on more strategic activities.

Santamaria sums up: "We saw a first-year USD 80 million opportunity to grow the business by building on our dominant position in corporate trade and leveraging technology to become a major player in the unwired media sector, which has unlimited scaling potential. If we could find the right technology to take the operational pressure off our team and let them focus on growth, we were confident that we could seize the initiative."

Tailored solutions for a more scalable business

Together with Essextec and IBM, Active International has developed a suite of intelligent applications that optimizes the media lifecycle and streamlines its strategic prospecting processes— elevating the productivity and efficiency of its core operations.

Santamaria explains why Active International chose to implement IBM technology: "We had recently moved our financial planning systems to IBM Planning Analytics and the project was a big success. That gave us a lot of confidence in IBM's technology and expertise."

Essextec and Active International utilized a suite of IBM Cloud solutions including IBM Db2® Warehouse on Cloud, IBM Compose for MongoDB, and IBM Compose for RabbitMQ to build an integrated solution designed to automate key aspects of the media management lifecycle for the company's unwired network. Among other things, the solution helps the company purchase media at the best value, optimize media pricing proposals, and track clients' media spend against their current balance of trade credits.

Using this solution as a foundation, the company has recently launched XACTV, an independent media product that advertisers can use to navigate the complex media marketplace, estimate and optimize local media market inventory, and track KPIs throughout their campaigns. XACTV can also be configured to support multiple client usage and payment methodologies, including cash-and-trade scenarios.

"The IBM Cloud platform is perfect for rapid application development," says Petreski. "The ability to integrate web-scale technologies quickly and combine them with IBM Watson® services is a unique advantage: it makes it so easy to enrich our applications with artificial intelligence and machine learning."

As an example, the team has used IBM Watson Discovery and IBM Watson Assistant to build a chatbot that supports a much more efficient approach to strategic prospecting.

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Lou Petreski, Executive Vice President and Chief Information Officer, Active International

Business development directors can ask the chatbot questions about a current or prospective client's company in natural language. The application then researches the client by analyzing and ranking multiple sources of structured and unstructured data and returns the most relevant data and intuitive infographics to help employees make strategic decisions—fast.

Santamaria says: "Thanks to the technical expertise of Essextec and the versatility of IBM technology, we were able to link the Watson services together and spin up development environments in no time. As a result, we accelerated our speed to market significantly. Within 18 months, we built a set of applications that completely transforms the way our media and business development teams work, and provides a strong foundation for future development."

Spurred on by the success of the unwired network, XACTV, and strategic prospecting projects, Active International decided to double down on its investment in cloud technologies by migrating its legacy platforms—around 100 applications and databases—to IBM Cloud bare metal servers.

"Our back-end systems contain commercially sensitive data about our clients' assets, trade credits, and media inventory," explains Petreski. "The IBM Cloud bare metal servers give us a dedicated infrastructure in IBM's tier-one data centers, so we have a lot of confidence that our data is properly protected and fully secure."

Active International sees IBM Cloud bare metal servers as a good fit for its security requirements because, unlike a multi-tenant public cloud service, the dedicated architecture ensures that clients' data is kept completely isolated from other systems and workloads. At the same time, the company benefits from outsourcing its infrastructure concerns to IBM, enabling the Active International team to focus on its core business.

In the months ahead, Active International will move the remainder of its core legacy systems to IBM Cloud bare metal servers. Once the company has made this move, it plans to build a central hub for all of its operations by fully integrating its unwired network and strategic prospecting applications with its legacy platforms.

A platform for unparalleled growth

With intelligent applications powered by IBM solutions in the cloud, Active International has streamlined its media purchasing activities and achieved a rapid return on investment, while keeping its data secure.

Santamaria says: "With IBM Cloud powering our XACTV unwired network product, we have greatly improved the efficiency of the entire media purchasing cycle. Our employees no longer spend hours manually calculating which media to purchase or running data analysis to help optimize client media proposals—these processes are now automated. That means we can easily scale our operations as demand grows, without increasing our headcount."

Active International has also seen reductions in the time required to identify new leads. Business development directors can now run analytics processes in minutes instead of hours to determine the viability of potential clients.

"The IBM Cloud helps us get new capabilities to market quickly, which has already helped us achieve return on investment several times over," continues Santamaria. "We're empowering our team to focus on growth instead of getting tied down with operational concerns—and as we continue to expand our media services business, we expect to see significant increases in revenue and profits."

Petreski adds: "The inherent scalability of the IBM Cloud puts us in an excellent position to meet the growing demand for our services, as we can scale out our systems without the costs of purchasing and maintaining our own hardware. Moreover, our data stays secure and under our control."

Looking to the future, Active International plans to develop its unwired network and strategic prospecting applications further by creating self-service portals for its clients.

Santamaria concludes: "With Essextec helping us develop innovative applications that enhance our core operations in the IBM Cloud, we can focus more time on helping clients transform their unwanted assets and deliver compelling media campaigns."

Solution components

- IBM® Cloud™ bare metal servers
- IBM Compose for MongoDB
- IBM Compose for RabbitMQ
- IBM Db2® Warehouse on Cloud
- IBM Planning Analytics
- IBM Watson® Assistant
- IBM Watson Discovery

Take the next step

To learn more about the IBM Cloud, please contact your IBM representative or IBM Business Partner, or visit ibm.com/cloud

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