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Exsys Selector Helps Guide Online Sales

Tool simplifies code maintenance by separating search criteria from app logic

BY ANDY PATRIZIO

Product information—and its presentation—can make or break many an online sale. In an attempt to simplify development and broaden the accuracy of searches on e-commerce sites, Exsys has introduced Selector, a system for building expert Web applications that provide more accurate product searches and recommendations to online shoppers.

Selector has a precoded architecture for product selection. Its five-tabbed interface offers areas for product information and questions for the prospective buyer about each product. This lets customers search by asking questions and searching within ranges, rather than checking off boxes corresponding to specifications and price limits.

By using the Selector developer system, attributes can be set by nondevelopers, said Dustin Huntington, president of Exsys. A product manager can specify his or her logical process for recommending an item. Using Selector is like using Visual Basic forms and tabs and working in a spreadsheet, said Huntington.

Online searches are typically done in one of two ways: either by a database search or by using a decision tree with linked pages. According to Huntington, neither is terribly accurate and each lacks the subtlety of spotting a near match. For example, a customer searching for a product that is under $400 would miss a $401 product, when that might prove a perfectly acceptable price to most customers.

The tool is designed to catch such near misses. "You can provide better expertise, something much more like talking to a real sales expert to get advice," said Huntington.

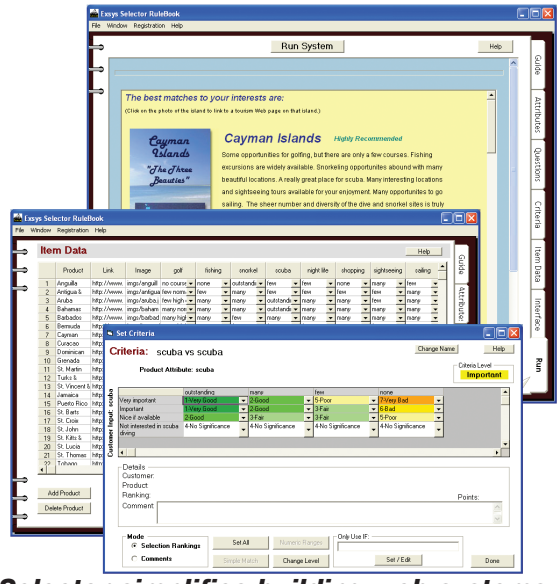
NO CHANGES TO CODE

Another problem with current search methods, asserted Huntington, is that search logic has to be hard-coded into the application. That, he said, means that changes in search criteria require changes to source code.

Selector solves this problem by storing product data such as features and pricing in a spreadsheet or database, and pulls its search criteria from there. So changes are made to that file, rather than the application code, he said.

Selector is based on an inference engine, expert-system technology developed over the company's 20 years and used in its other knowledge automation tools and products.

Huntington said that Selector is the first in a forthcoming series of specialized Web-based expert systems. It's available now for US$2,999 for a single-developer license, with no deployment or runtime charges.



Selector simplifies building web systems that recommend the best product for each visitor.