Cincinnati Zoo Uses Business Analytics

The Cincinnati Zoo is using business analytics software to increase ticket, food and merchandise sales -- and that could be good news for animal conservation efforts.

Whether you're running Best Buy or whether you're running a zoo or IBM, if you can create that unexpected reward where [the consumer] didn't even know it was coming, that is a key ingredient for retaining them as a long-term customer.

John Lucas, director of park operations, Cincinnati Zoo

The popular zoo is the second oldest in the world and features more than 300 animal exhibits and a sweeping botanical garden. It began using business analytics software last July in an effort to gain insights into the behavior of its nearly 1.3 million annual visitors, according to John Lucas, director of park operations.

Business analytics software allows users to identify trends and other valuable information often hidden within the heaps of data spread throughout an organization. The information gleaned is then used to create things like business intelligence (BI) reports, sales forecasts and highly targeted marketing campaigns.

But increasing revenue is just the beginning. The nonprofit zoo is constantly looking at new ways to take advantage of analytics, and Lucas thinks the technology could one day be a boon to animal conservation efforts at his organization and around the world.

"I was out doing a presentation on our project to the Monterey Bay Aquarium, which is one of the top conservation aquariums on the planet, and they have their own research arm that does underwater research right there in Monterey," said Lucas, who also sits on the business operations committee of the Association of Zoos & Aquariums. "That type of information really lends itself to doing analytics, so I'm pretty interested in that."

Business analytics software brings order to chaos

The Cincinnati Zoo's journey into the realm of business analytics began in early 2010 when officials with the organization realized that they were failing to maximize the value of their information.

The zoo used four separate systems to capture and collect revenue and admission data -- one for retail, one for ticketing, one for food and beverage, and one for donations -- and those systems were not integrated on the back end, according to Lucas.

Management wanted to easily determine things like how much a particular visitor spent at the park in a given year, or which brand of beer is most popular at the zoo's many food and beverage stands. But getting that information quickly was difficult.

"We were paralyzed when we looked at the ability to try and gain insight into [the] business," Lucas said. "We did the best we could [with] manual processes and spreadsheets and things like that, but drawing links between different events and different behavior in our business in a timely fashion was generally impossible."

That's when zoo officials decided to move forward with the business analytics software project. First, they replaced 24 cash registers with integrated point-of-sale systems from Gateway Ticketing Systems Inc. in