byRequest puts report delivery into overdrive

Electronic distribution is easy, flexible and accommodates many file formats

Review by Shawn Gordon

Quite simply, byRequest is a method for delivering reports electronically. There have been a number of these types of products over the years, some better than others. When I first saw byRequest I assumed two things: first, it was just another electronic report distribution package; and second, that with their famed Sheetmate software, Hillary

Software was probably able to generate native file formats for a number of things like MS Word and Excel. Well I was wrong about the first, and right about the second.

Hillary has taken a different tack than competing software solutions for report delivery, but I'll get to those details in a bit. Essentially, byRequest will allow you to select and route spool files based on various types of parameters for selection (all based on objects available from LIST-SPF). These reports can be sent by e-mail or fax to a disk drive for later browsing (like a Web browser interface), or to the screen. Your format can be text, HTML, Word, Excel or PDF.

There are other nifty features like electronic bursting and collection of data, as well as columnizing a report to go to Excel. All of which I will get to shortly.

How does it work?

Unlike every other product that I've seen in this genre, byRequest doesn't have any 3000 host-based software: that is to say, nothing runs on the HP 3000. This allows them to be multi-platform with more ease than if they had to write servers for every system they work with. Either by making use of Reflection as an OLE server for sending commands to and from the HP, or by using a combination of FTP/Telnet, byRequest will log on and issue various LISTSPF commands to parse and qualify file names that have to be transferred and processed.

The download takes place via FTP or the WRQ file transfer protocol, depending

on what system you use. The nice part is that byRequest seems to figure out what to use all on its own, you just need to supply the IP address and logon information.
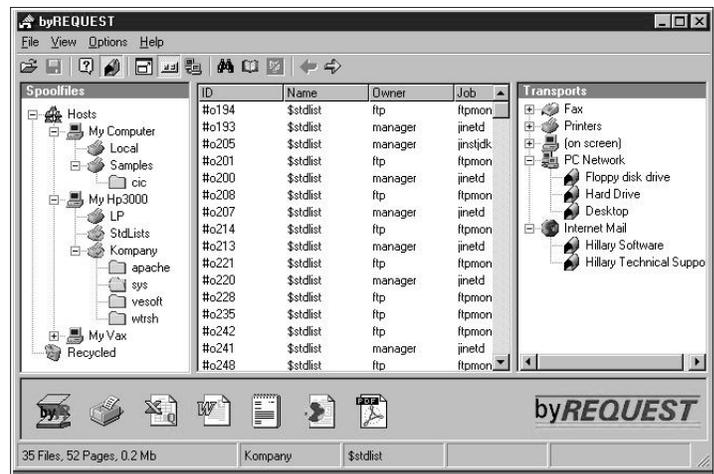

Figure 1: The main interface screen for byRequest

byRequest is written in Visual Basic, and as such is totally resident on the Windows platform. I would be more inclined to use it as a server and have it running somewhere on your NT server, processing spool requests and routing the reports, as opposed to putting it on users desktops.

byRequest has a built in viewer, but there really isn't any reason to use it in a production environment. If you were to put this on a users desktop you would expect data to be driven into it, and be able to create folders to organize and store it. byRequest isn't put together like that — it is more of a spool browser, and you can't create any internal organizational scheme. It really makes more sense to send it to e-mail, and use the foldering mechanism found in any e-mail system to organize your reports.

Features

Figure 1 shows the main interface to byRequest. On the left pane are sources
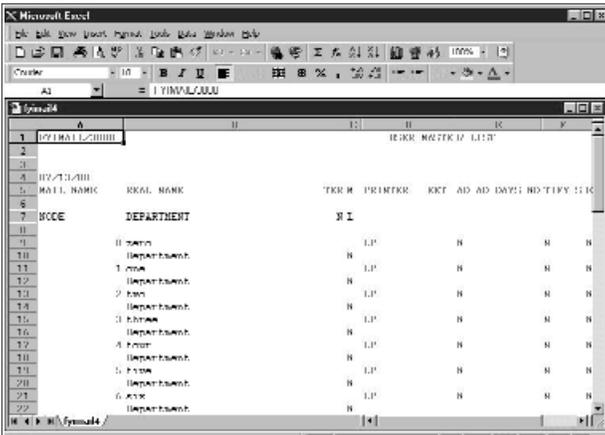
Figure 2: byRequest can figure columns out

of data. You can make these spool files, or flat files, and a variety of platforms are supported. You will want to configure your own spooler or a variety of spoolers that conform to the selection criteria you are interested in. This gives you a way of breaking down what you are looking at into logical groupings.

Within that spooler, byRequest will automatically create folders for each account that spool files are in. Since the spooler I set up was for MANAGER.SYS, I was seeing everything on my system.

In the center pane you will see a grid with spool files that match the criteria for the selected spooler and folder. You can select any of these reports and drag them to one of the icons below to view it in one of the selected formats. The program will download the file, parse it, format it for the destination viewer, and then launch the program. Figures 2, 3 and 4 show the same report in Excel, Word, and Internet Explorer.

What I found fascinating about the Excel export is what a decent job byRequest did in trying to formatting the data correctly by breaking it into columns. If you drop the report onto the little stack of greenbar that says "ByR," you will be presented with the spool template setup screen seen in Figure 5.

When you're setting up the template parameters for a spool file, there are just all sorts of really cool things you can define. If you look at Figure 5, you will see where I have the report set up to define columns — if this were something that you were going to send to Excel, for example. You saw in Figure 2 what the default was for letting byRequest figure out how to set columns. Honestly, it did a pretty darn good job, especially considering that

the report has two lines of data per page.

This template setup section also allows you to apply Word or Excel macros to the document after processing, which allows for even more options. One of my favorite sections in here is setting up the automated bursting parameters. Say you have a report that has logical breaks in it, like Office Code or Salesman, but it's all part of one report and you have the operators break it up and hand it out. Now byRequest can do this for you.

So selecting, formatting and viewing are one piece of the puzzle. The other piece is getting the reports where they can do some good. My personal favorite is to e-mail them to someone as an attachment. You could also send them
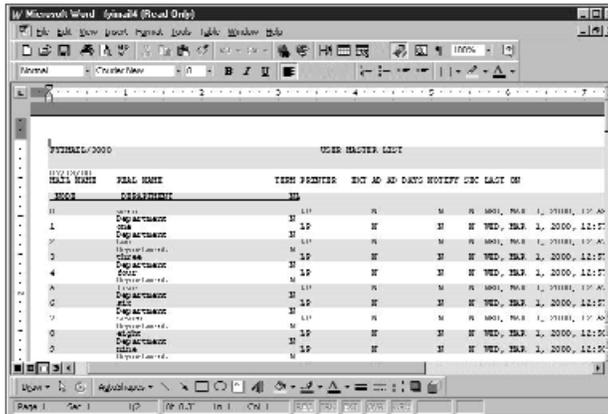

Figure 3: A report set up as a Word file

as faxes, or you could select HTML and output them to a directory on your Web server — so people could browse the file from anywhere. There are options you can set up so that the name of the file will hopefully be meaningful and people will know what to look for.

Installation and Documentation

The software only installs on your PC, so the standard Windows installation process was followed, and it went flawlessly. The documentation is electronic and very complete. I only browsed through the doc to make sure it was there and covered the product, I really didn't have any need to use the doc while I worked with the software. The online help in byRequest is pretty darn cool. If you look at Figure 1 or 5, you will see a pane on the right, and this can be toggled to have context sensitive help

at any time being displayed. I really enjoyed this feature of the product.

The TestDrive

Hillary likes to spend about 20 minutes with you on the phone walking you through the product, and I found this to be a very helpful thing. It shows some of the design philosophy and user interface items quickly, and introduces you to a number of features that you may not stumble across by randomly working with the product.

byRequest is very drag-n-drop oriented — you drag reports from the grid to a viewer, you drag a transport onto a report. This is very convenient and very intuitive.

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I had fun taking reports and dropping them into different viewers and e-mailing them back to myself. I was really pleased with how well all the conversion and transportation worked on the reports, and this is the part that is going to be most important to people. You probably aren't going to have people using the standard user interface other than to set up the environment and do some testing. The interface is very nice, it's just a bit delicate, in my experience.

One of my concerns is that under a very large number of configurations you might end up with a performance problem because of all the redirected LIST-
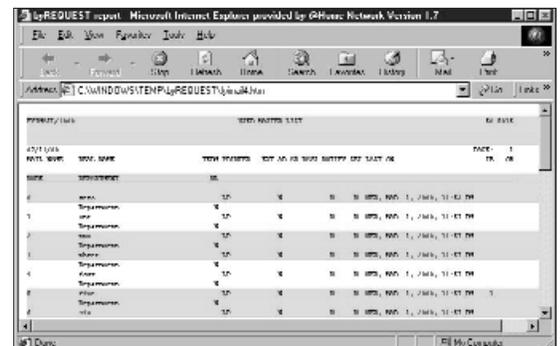

Figure 4: A report set up for Explorer

SPF commands. They aren't using anything like the AIF for interrupt-driven processing to reduce the overhead. You will want to evaluate this for yourself.

Conclusions

As usual, I'll start with my nitpicks. I didn't care for the fact that byRequest defaults to using MS Outlook and Reflection. There was no way directly to

Figure 5: A report set up to define columns

make it "know" about Eudora or Netscape mail, both of which are very popular (and what I use). There are some polish issues as well: a simple example is that the icon in the task bar has a nice name and icon, but if you use alt+tab to go between applications, the icon is the default slanted page that is generated from Visual Basic. Also, when you have a list of data that needs to scroll, and you drag the slider to the right, the data doesn't actually scroll, but jumps after you let go of the slider.

But those problems don't detract much from this fact: byRequest is a totally awesome product. It's the wealth of distribution options that make it so cool, as well as all of its native file format support. It is really very simple to create a template that exports some financial report into an Excel spreadsheet, for example. You don't have to change the program, or write a new program, or retype the data. How often have you been confronted with that task?

Electronic bursting is also a personal favorite. Now you can have the software break apart and distribute your report for you. Hillary really did a fantastic job of thinking about the issues of paper delivery and solving virtually all of them. I was seriously impressed with this product and will be personally recommending it to clients. If you have the 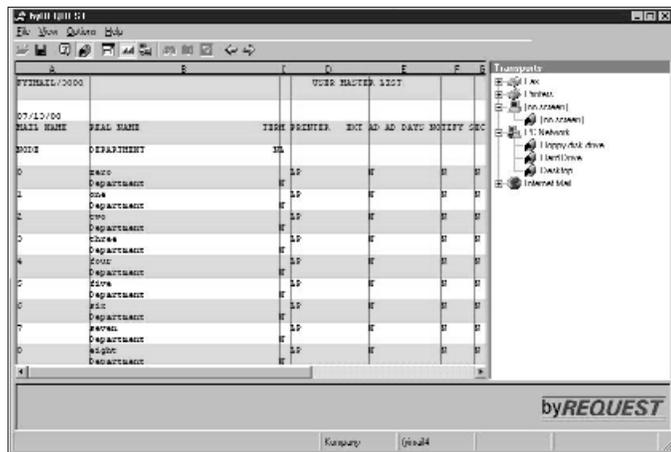need, I would look at this product for sure.