West Wind Email: A FoxPro Email Tool

Most of the pieces of software we've looked at in this column have been utilities for the developer. That is, they aren't ever seen by the user, but rather, enable the developer to do something behind the scenes for the application. And on occasion, the Cool Tool is just a developer tool - used to make the developer's life easier.

This month, we head down a different path and present a Cool Tool that is intended to be included as part of an application - and to be used by the application's ultimate end user. Rick Strahl's West Wind Email utility provides email capability completely within a FoxPro application.

You've heard the old adage - "The harder I work, the luckier I get"? I found this to be especially true last week when I had a customer request the ability to send messages between various users of the application after specific tasks were complete. "We know that FoxPro doesn't have email capabilities, so we're going to need an outside package. Do you think we'll need an email package, or should we try to hook in a "forms" package instead?" they asked. Rick had just sent me the latest version of West Wind Email a couple days before, and I was lucky enough to have found time to try it out, so I was able to respond, "Actually, I know of a FoxPro application that will provide this ability completely within the system." And when they said, "Cool!" I knew I should write about it in this column.

Getting Started

West Wind Email is an exceptionally intuitive email utility that can be integrated within another application or used as a standalone email facility. When trying it out, All I had to do was put WWEMAIL.APP (and the associated help files) in it's own directory. I then loaded up two FoxPro sessions (one in Windows and one in DOS), switched to that directory, and typed "DO WWEMAIL.APP" wand was off and running.

When you run WWEM, it first looks for a user file - if they aren't found, you are prompted through the creation of the email and user files.

[Insert BMP: WWEM01.BMP. Caption: "West Wind Email will warn you if it's configuration files aren't found.]

When you add users, you can assign them to one or more groups in order to facilitate sending mail to groups of users, rather than having to send the same message to each user individually. And you don't have to create the groups as a separate operation. Here, while I was creating a second user, I used the Group pushbutton to create three groups - the Muppets, the FoxGang, and the Dream Team.

[Insert BMP: WWEM02.BMP. Caption: Creating Groups for users enables you to send the same message to multiple users with one command.]

Then, when adding Kermit The Frog as a user, I assigned him to two groups - the Muppets and the Dream Team.

[Insert BMP: WWEM03.BMP. Caption: Assigning a user to one or more groups is done through a Mover dialog.]

The next time you run WWEmail, it will present a login screen from which you can also change your password and modify the groups to which you belong.

[Insert BMP: WWEM04.BMP. Caption: The West Wind Email login screen provides several options.]

Once logged in, you're presented with the Mail Center dialog from which you can send, receive and manage messages. West Wind Email categorizes messages according to "folders" and comes with "Incoming" and "Outgoing" folders already set up. You can view messages by folder and process them as you like - reading, saving (either to disk or to a folder), deleting, and forwarding to others. You can also change the order in which the messages are displayed - by date, sender or topic.

[Insert BMP: WWEM05.BMP. Caption: Selecting which folder to view is done through a popup in the Mail Folder dialog.]

When you select Send message, you're presented with a dialog that allows you to select one or more groups of users as well as individuals. Each message can have a title and a message. You can also attach a file to your message.

[Insert BMP: WWEM06.BMP. Caption: Sending a message to Kermit.]

You can create multiple folders which allows you to categorize groups of messages much like you can categorize groups of users. This is particularly handy when you are corresponding about a specific topic and wish to save all of the messages about a specific topic. In the mail folder dialog, you can also select a folder and view the messages contained within.

One of the nicest things about West Wind Email is that it's completely cross platform between DOS and Windows. While working with it, I was running two sessions on one machine - one on each platform so I could keep track of which user I was emulating. It was completely transparent and worked perfectly.

[Insert BMP: WWEM07.BMP. Caption: Saving a message about Miss Piggy in the "piggy" folder while running West Wind Email under DOS.]

The Reply feature enables you to reply to a message that you're reading. The Reply dialog includes split screen viewing, quoting from the message being read using the Windows clipboard, and importing text files into the reply.

[Insert BMP: WWEM08.BMP. Caption: The West Wind Email menu provides the ability to quote from the incoming message and to import text files into the reply.]

Advanced Functionality

Remember that West Wind Email is designed to be used inside your own custom applications. As a result, you can also call it via a set of parameters in order to drive selected options. For instance, the command

do WWEMAIL.APP with "MAINTAIN"

will automatically call up the mail maintenance dialog. This would be useful if you had a separate "MAIL" menu option, under which you wanted a "Mail Maintenance" option. This provides the user with the ability to perform a number of tasks like deleting old messages and packing the mail file, so it's advised that you use the Change Password option to prevent non-authorized users from accessing the screen.

[Insert BMP: WWEM09.BMP. Caption: Calling West Wind Email with the "MAINTAIN" parameter provides access to several administrator functions.]

The parameter mode is quite extensive, with ten possible parameters. The first parameter describes the mode in which West Wind Email is being run - including (but not limited to) MAINTAIN, CHECKMAIL (the default), and USERS. The rest of the parameters enable you to run the program in each of these modes with specific user names, passwords, file names, and message values.

Two specific uses for these parameters are to specify your own user/password file (so that you don't have to maintain two user databases for the same application), and to drive selected functions (like packing and reindexing) through your application instead of within West Wind Email's interface. All this boils down to full control of WWEM from within your application.

Final Comments

There are two things that I particularly like about West Wind Email. First, it's incredibly easy to use without being simplistic. It can do everything I want "out of the box" but I never had to look at the help file. Every option and function worked like I expected it to.

The other thing I liked, and which actually took me by surprise, was it's complete lack of need for configuration. In other words, I didn't have to tell it about the network it was running on. As long as your FoxPro application is already set up to be multi-user, West Wind Email is ready to go.

Furthermore, the documentation that comes with West Wind Email - both the TXT files on disk and the user help (via F1) is extensive and will help you decide if West Wind is for you, and if so, how to use and customize it.

Where To Get It

The West Wind Email package (a ZIPPED file named WW2_00.ZIP) consists of about a dozen files - the West Wind .APP file, several help files, and a number of documentation TXT files. If, after working with it for a while, you've decided that West Wind is one of those "gotta haves," remember that this is shareware - if you like it and use it, you must register it. You can either send him a check for $49, or GO SWREG on CompuServe and have the charge appear on next month's CIS bill. You can find West Wind EMail on this month's Companion Disk or in CompuServe's FoxForum libraries. You can contact the author, Rick Strahl, on CompuServe at 76427,2363 or at 503.386.2087.