

Build A Flexible Route Accounting Solution

A systems integrator's ability to provide a wireless mobile solution that accommodates dial-up and Wi-Fi helps it earn a \$500,000 install with a publishing company.

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Flexibility. It's often the deal maker/breaker for a VAR. Sometimes being flexible means lowering the price of a solution. At other times, being flexible doesn't require you to compromise your profit margins; but, it does require you to show ingenuity. The latter kind of flexibility is what helped systems integrator and software developer Data Concepts, Inc. earn a half-million-dollar install with Langenscheidt Publishing Group, a publisher of maps, foreign language books, and dictionaries.

Data Concepts discovered the publishing company's need for a new mobile solution from a consultant partner. The publishing company's field sales force had used the same legacy mobile computers for the past 10 years, and it was time for a technology refresh. Data Concepts was one of several integrators that bid on the job.

Understand Your Customer's Business Frustrations

The first thing the integrator did prior to recommending a solution was to understand what kinds of problems the customer was experiencing with its legacy system. Several issues were uncovered. First, field sales workers needed to scan UPC (universal product code) and EAN (European article numbering) codes, which appeared on the maps and books, but their legacy handhelds only recognized UPCs. Plus, many of the publishing company's customers (e.g. Barnes & Noble) had Wi-Fi, but the field salespeople didn't have Wi-Fi-enabled handhelds. Even though the legacy handhelds could connect via dial-up (to confirm inventory availability and place orders), some of the smaller book retailers couldn't afford to have a telephone line tied up very long. Finally, the publishing company used long characters in its Dynamics Great Plains Microsoft SQL Server database, which had to be converted from alphanumeric to numeric to be read by the legacy handhelds, which made the slow dial-up experience even slower.

Provide Mobility, Wireless, And Fast Data Access

Data Concepts customized its proprietary route accounting software, MobilePDQ, which is built in C# (pronounced C-sharp) programming language on a .NET platform. Next, it loaded the software on an Intermec Technologies 751 handheld, which it sourced through value-added distributor (VAD) Avnet. One of the features the integrator added to the software was an algorithm that enabled the Intermec scanner to compare bar code data against a list of UPC and EAN data tables and automatically recognize the correct bar code format. Another feature enabled the handheld to receive information from the publishing company's SQL Server database without requiring alphanumeric-to-numeric conversion. The integrator also built in features that took advantage of the handheld's Wi-Fi and Bluetooth functionality. For instance, one of the prompts on the handheld's touch screen asks sales reps to indicate whether they are connecting to headquarters via dial-up, Wi-Fi, or LAN (via an Ethernet connection). If the sales rep selects 'Wi-Fi,' the handheld automatically establishes a secure connection (via a Microsoft Internet

Information Services [IIS] Web server) to Langenscheidt Publishing Group's Handheld Management System middleware SQL database.

The integrator also added an Intermec PB40 Bluetooth printer with the demo handheld, which enables sales reps to provide customers with order forms, confirming whether an order will be drop shipped or personally delivered, and it also enables reps to print customer invoices.

The publishing company gave several of its 75 sales reps the opportunity to try Data Concepts' solution during a four-month pilot and compare it to other solutions. "The overwhelming feedback was that our solution was easier to use and much more responsive than any of our competitors' solutions," recalls Phil Beck, president of Data Concepts. "We not only won the handheld, mobile printer, and software sale, but a large integration project as well." The integration project entailed changing the way data was accessed by the handhelds. "We enabled the handhelds to receive only the data that the sales reps needed rather than accessing and displaying an entire table of information," says Beck. "We also incorporated special data compression and transmission techniques to make dial-up connections work more quickly."

Because of the size of the project, Data Concepts worked with Avnet to set up a credit line/financing plan with the publishing company. "Our VAD has resources that enable it to obtain thorough credit information on our customers, plus the financing program enables us to receive payment more quickly," says Beck. What's the takeaway? If you want to be a successful VAR/integrator, you need to be flexible with your customers, and you need to partner with vendors and VADs that offer you the flexibility you need.

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