

Why Mobility solutions stack up - in \$ and sense

Having staff moving from job to job more efficiently and transaction information flowing straight into your back-end systems, is the sure fire way to get greater revenue and productivity from your mobile teams. Read on to find out how...

By Chris Smith

As a former sales manager for an FMCG company, I feel uniquely qualified to write this article – because, having spent years at the coalface of sales, I know full well how bereft of usable information and technology I was, and how impressive today's mobile sales applications are by comparison. Now while you might think I'm talking about repping in the 1960s, I'm not.

Try the early 90s instead. Back then I was travelling all over the country filling in for sick reps. Taking over their calls, I'd walk into supermarkets with a cardboard order card, count all the stock on hand, write that number in the card, and then approach the grocery manager to work up an order. I either had no idea, or a very vague idea, of what our out-of stocks were (and there were routinely many). I also had little idea of what had been successfully delivered from the preceding order. Yes I had a folder jammed with print outs and pricing information, but it was very difficult to even get five minutes with a buyer at a desk to shuffle through this, so we had to be ready to do our sales presentations leaning on cartons out by the credit bins.

Put simply, it wasn't sophisticated. Product and pricing knowledge was difficult to access, and as far as specific store information went – on which to propose sales specials or bonus deals – all I had to go on was that ragged sales card and the previous entries. Now while it would be nice to say that scenarios like this are all now ancient history, there will be many reading this article today for whom the cardboard or paper order form is still the dominant piece of sales kit in the hands of their sales teams – with all the inherent productivity losses that that brings.

Mobile sales applications – the process

So how does a mobile sales application change all this? Typically it will run on some kind of portable computing device – either a laptop, Tablet PC or PDA. The complexity of the order entry will often dictate the type of device used, as screen size may be important in ease-of-ordering terms.

The device can either be 'always on' – permanently connected to office servers wirelessly – allowing users to dispatch their orders real-time. Or it can connect and synchronise at various times during the day – sending orders and receiving relevant sales information and emails etc. The order process will in many ways mimic what was once done with paper orders, however, instead of faxing them in or delivering them to the office by hand, the orders are sent wirelessly.

This means the order dispatch process begins almost as soon as the order is taken, and it also means office bound order entry staff don't have to re-key orders (and potentially make mistakes while doing so) which ultimately means less credits and more satisfied customers. The suite of tools & information available in a mobile sales application will usually include sales orders, customer sales history, corporate email, (typically synchronised with Microsoft Outlook or Lotus Notes), sales opportunities and promotions, often with the ability to record proposals and quotes, and marketing information like special trade promotions relevant to that particular customer.

Back at the office, the mobile sales application integrates with legacy ERP systems and warehousing solutions. Out-ofstocks are immediately highlighted so the buyer can be advised or request substitutes. Electronic orders are picked and dispatched without any re-keying. Sales representatives are thus given better information and more time in the field with their customers – as opposed to sorting out problems and paperwork in their offices (something I spent at least an hour a day on as a sales rep), which makes them more productive.

We're talking profits

While there are many benefits in using mobile sales applications – no re-keying, enhanced order accuracy, better customer service, faster stock turns – perhaps the main one is better utilisation of a sales rep's time.

Companies should be looking to target three things when they investigate sales force automation solutions;

- 1) More calls in a day.
- 2) Improving the chances of getting an order
- 3) Increasing the value of the orders.

So let's do some numbers – using the hypothetical example of a team of 20 sales reps, making an average of five sales calls a day. As a sales rep, it took me around 15 minutes after a call, to transfer the card info onto an order sheet, and about 40 minutes to drive to our office and hand the days orders in for keying (they were almost a metre across, so too large to fax). On an average day that amounted to almost two hours wasted. For argument's sake, let's say my company made \$100 profit per sales call I made.

Now, if using a mobile sales application freed up enough time to make just one extra sales call a day, then that would equate to \$500 a week extra profit, or \$26,000 a year. Multiply that across a team of 20 representatives and you're talking \$520,000 a year.

But that's not all. With a comprehensive sales history of each customer, up to date stock levels and client specific promotional information at their fingertips, we can assume that a sales rep should be able to increase the profitability of each call by at least \$20. Across the entire sales team, that's about another \$500,000 a year. Suffice to say, the return on investment from a mobile sales application is significant, and occurs more quickly than you might think.

Implementation - how to

The first step of any mobile sales application implementation is to establish the need and the desired financial or process outcomes, and gain senior management commitment to the project.

Then you will have to pick your technology partners. There are three basic categories of partners;

- 1) Network providers (Ie: Telstra, Vodafone) who provide the wireless connection. Excellent coverage is required to ensure the system works when and where your team needs it to, so check for coverage in your rep's most isolated call areas, or make sure you cover off-line usage.
- 2) Hardware platform providers (for laptops, Tablets or PDAs) – and these may be conditional on what network you opt for.

- 3) Software application providers. You should choose the software provider first because application usability is the most important component.

Typically, integration is not difficult as most apps can easily integrate with existing ERP systems. In selecting hardware, consider the mix of technology that's going to be needed to optimise the mobile work force's effectiveness. The sales team, for instance, might need mobile access from laptops that double as sales presentation platforms (so a laptop or Tablet-sized screen will be required). Once all these aspects have been scoped, implementation times can vary, but most businesses are typically only a few months away from being able to empower their sales teams. Time frames can be affected by the complexity of the information required, for example, a company may want images of its products scanned or it may need to tidy up its financial system, and standardise product descriptions. That said, five to 16 weeks would be a typical mobile sales application installation time frame.

Mobile solutions are worth a closer look wouldn't you say?

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