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TECHNOLOGY UPDATE

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How to Choose Your Routing Software

Beverage industry software may be the right solution

Pepsi and Coca Cola have rapidly increased their marketshares in the bottled water industry, according to *Connection*, a quarterly publication for the Culligan Dealers Association of North America.¹ Pepsi and Coca Cola have raised their marketshares from zero to 11 percent and 10 percent, respectively, in 2002. Aquafina, the bottled water brand of Pepsi, sold \$838 million worth of bottled water in the same year. Is the success of these companies merely related to name recognition and tons of money spent on marketing? Perhaps, but it is equally certain that benefits derive from software designed for beverage distribution as opposed to software designed exclusively for bottled water distributors. Software limited to bottled water distribution, has a different feature set than software designed for the beverage industry. But water is a beverage. Thus, large companies have a tremendous advantage not only because of large marketing budgets, an army of sales people, an enormous distribution channel already in place and numerous deals and discounts from suppliers and distributors, but because the software that they use makes all of the above possible to handle efficiently, smoothly and quickly.

It is certainly unlikely that small to medium-sized companies can afford the software used by the largest beverage distributors. Well-written software comes with a big price tag. Much time and thought has gone into this kind of software, and programmers need to make a living while they develop vertical software programs. Yet there is sophisticated software written for the small to mid-sized businesses that conceptualizes bottled water delivery as a particular form of beverage delivery. The question is how to evaluate the quality of the various software products. After all, owners of bottled water companies are experts in their business and not in

judging software. So what should someone look for?

As is clear from the above, good routing software should not be specifically written for the bottled water business. If software is designed in a framework limited to this particular industry only, the software misses functionality that enhances efficiency in many aspects of the routing process. For instance, some software products do not adequately integrate inventory control from the PDA software into the desktop software. Others do not allow signature-capturing or bar-coding since the industry used to be perceived as simply delivering a single product: 5-gallon bottles of water. Yet, as any bottled water company knows, even this single product comes with different prices, its own complexity including the fact that bottles can disappear if they are not accounted for responsibly.

Software for the beverage industry has much experience in dealing with these issues. For instance, quality software is able to handle deals, discounts, group pricing, promotions and perpetual truck inventory on PDAs. It knows how to deal with returns (both restocking and waste), par values, future order taking on the desktop and the PDAs. Mobile solutions can be used by both salespeople and drivers—allowing the salespeople to take future orders on the PDA while the drivers generate invoices at the site. The companies may do both presales and route sales; they may have a combination of on-route and off-route sales and they may have static and also dynamic routing needs. In short, bottled water companies benefit greatly from software that integrates features from beverage software into software for the water delivery industry.

Another important characteristic helps in evaluating the quality of routing software. One has to determine the user-friendliness of the product. What

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About the Author

Lorraine Keating is president of Prism Visual Software, Inc., a software company that develops solutions for the field service and delivery industries. Prism's software has won major awards from renowned technology organizations such as *Computerworld's* "100 Emerging Companies to Watch in 2002." With 10 years of experience in the bottled water and water treatment industries, the Prism team developed MiniMate-PDA solution that integrates seamlessly with Prism's routing and servicing packages RoadQuest and ServQuest. Prism can be reached at 516-944-5920; info@prismvs.com.

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does "user-friendliness" mean?

Without much experience, most people have a hard time understanding this idea. Doesn't all software more or less look the same? This only is true for the novice. An experienced user knows that user-friendliness is the cornerstone of good software. It matters if one has to make three clicks or only one to accomplish a task. Consider, for instance, a driver who uses a PDA to complete each stop. If for every stop this driver has to make 6-10 clicks and move through multiple screens instead of making only one or two clicks and staying with the basic screen until the stop is completed, the driver not only is forced to waste valuable time but the potential for errors increases, too. The central question is how the delivery and customer information appears on a PDA screen and how easily the information can be accessed and changed. Are the various line items listed on one or two screens or must a driver click through multiple screens to add another line item? These are the kind of questions an informed software buyer should ask in order to determine if the software provides the user-friendliness that will make the delivery process easier and not more cumbersome.

Finally, another trait determines the quality of routing software for the bottled water industry. Again the focus is on handheld software and particularly on the collecting and invoicing process. Many PDA software programs allow a driver to collect monies but the collection is not always securely saved in the PDA software. For this reason some bottled water companies do not like their drivers to collect the money. An informed software buyer has to determine if the PDA software blocks a driver from accessing a customer's site once monies were collected. The software should provide options: For instance, if the invoice remains unpaid, the software has to allow for the invoice to remain open. But if a customer is available and willing to pay the driver, the software should, of course, enable a secured payment note in the PDA software. Quality software even allows for the printing of detailed invoices at delivery sites.

Choosing software is fun if you know what to look for. The saying goes that the devil is in the details. In the case of routing software, the details reveal the superiority of one software product over another. The largest beverage distributors may spend huge amounts of money on their software, guaranteeing rapid success expanding

into bottled water, but small to mid-sized companies need to wisely evaluate the software offerings within their budget range to find "the one" that gives them the best edge. It is worth the time investment to find the software that saves time and monies in the scheduling, delivering, collecting and invoicing process. The trick is to stay within your budget but not to make

the decision on price alone. Choose quality software that is affordable and offers as much as you can get in the functionality described above.

Reference

- 1 "Bottled Water Moves Up in the Rankings Says Beverage Marketing Corp.," *Connection*, no. 2 (August 2003), 26.

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