CHAIN REACTION

Dawn Adams reports

RETAILERS ARE BEING OFFERED A GROWING NUMBER OF OPTIONS TO AUTOMATE THEIR PROCESSES FROM LEAD GENERATION THROUGH TO FINAL PAYMENT.

Every link in the supply chain can be seamlessly connected as processes in the window furnishings sector become increasingly automated. These systems empower sales reps to quote, print and finalise an order in the field. From that point, information is inserted once to minimise errors and the order electronically progresses through to final fulfilment. The data entered is also providing businesses with valuable information that can be analysed to improve efficiencies, foster staff performance and develop marketing campaigns that drive sales.

These systems are changing the way work is completed within the sector. Just one example is measuring a window. Rather than use a tape measure and manually record each measurement, windows can now be measured electronically and the data automatically transmitted to a central database.

And increasingly, options are available to avoid down-time when in-house servers crash or the internet is not accessible while sales reps are quoting in the field.

CLOUD VERSION A BUZ SOFTWARE INNOVATION

Buz Software has developed a cloud version that can be used with a tablet at any site. "This is our biggest project at the moment," says general manager Brendan Saunders. "It is costly to get hardware inside an office and there needs to be security and air conditioning so the system doesn't crash."

In contrast, the cloud version operates from Telstra's data centre. "There is no maintenance for the client and the monthly cost is cheaper than having an in-house server," he says.

1.2._BUZ SOFTWARE 3._DRAPE AND BLIND SOFTWARE

MOBILE SOLUTIONS AT DBS

INSYTE SYSTEM DRIVES CULTURAL CHANGE

The cloud version can operate with just one user and be operational in an hour while the previous version was only cost effective if there were at least five users. "When we developed the cloud version, smaller customers were the main target but now, we're seeing bigger customers considering it as well," Saunders says.

Attractive to businesses is that the Telstra data centre is operational nearly 100 per cent of the time. "If the internet goes down in an office, everything is down including the sales reps in the field," he says. "In cloud, the sales reps can keep working, it's never down. A lot of our customers are in fairly remote locations and their online ordering can be quite slow and this overcomes that situation."

The firm, which can also retain up to six months of data for its clients, has created features for sales reps to manage their leads, report on their progress as well as quote and secure an order at the customer's site. "The technology is moving with the demand; in the past, it was more difficult to get printers that were portable enough to take in the field," he says.

Also new are infrared devices to measure a window and send data back to the program electronically. Their use eliminates the need for a tape measure, thereby reducing errors.

Clients are seeking mobile solutions to deliver quotes swiftly to end consumers, according to Mira Krulic from Drape & Blind Software from Fernstar. "The onset of the mobile phone as a mini-computer has revolutionised everything," she says. "People are interested in these types of applications."

Krulic explains how the firm's system works on a mobile tablet PC that does not rely on internet access. "We decided to do that because the internet is not always available when reps go to a client's home," she says. "Our system works using a Samsung Galaxy 7, a fully-fledged PC with computing power, to do a quote. If there is no internet connection, a quote can still be printed at the site."

She claims this technology frees up time to sell a product and develop a relationship with a customer. "They are selling their knowledge to the client," she says. "Our product gives them the ability to do away with manual paperwork and to concentrate on the client and spend valuable time discussing what they want."

Among the advantages to the firm's system is that multiple quotes can be generated quickly to give the customer a variety of options to consider. If a customer changes their mind on the type of fabric they prefer, for example, a quick adjustment will lead to another quote. Krulic insists this speedy response is important to secure a sale.

"Clients are reluctant to wait for a quote," she says. "They don't like you to go away and wait three or four days for a quote."

Also recently introduced is a module that allows the installer to send measurements to a central database. "The system has the ability for the installer or sales rep to use an electronic measuring device for a window," she says. "They can click a button to send the measurements back to the tablet without getting off a ladder to write them down; it stops people transposing errors. At the end of the day, it's all becoming more automated, allowing information to be put into the system once."

And in a major coup, the firm recently secured its first US client after exhibiting at the Vision Show in Las Vegas in 2011. Plans are to further develop that market into the future.

Automated systems build greater efficiencies, reduce error rates and can become the driver to change the culture of a business, according to Loryn Jenkins, Insyte Software operations manager. He explains how the firm's system reduces the time required to process orders because data is entered only once.

"Every bit of information, whether it's the lead or contact details or an appointment time, is captured once and transmitted through the system," he says. "By decreasing the need for re-writing information, there is less opportunity for human error which means material wastage is also minimised."

Designed to link every step in the supply chain from capturing the leads to final payment and delivery, the system provides highly customised workflow processes. "The system changes the work that needs to be completed and it becomes a monitoring process," he says. Instead of manually moving an order through the various steps, they are automatically processed so that front office staff can manage the exceptions."

He encourages businesses to change their processes to capture the greatest benefit from introducing the firm's system. "The really switched on companies use the ability to change processes to drive cultural change," he says. "And not every company moves towards the same culture."

For example, a client might become focused on automating everything possible including customer communications so that staff focus purely on exceptions. In another example, Jenkins says the system can be used to free up staff so that they can do the exact opposite and spend more time interacting with customers. A third option might be to use the information within the system to drive marketing innovation.

"They might change the way they do outbound email campaigns or offers to past customers based on the knowledge they have about their personal profiles," he said. "That represents an advantage over their competition who don't have access to that same information."