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Feature

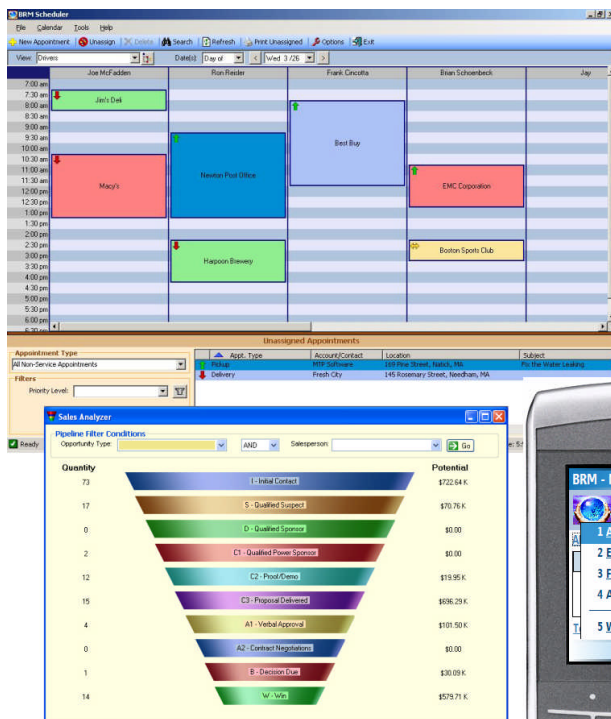
How updating your dealership software will help you through tough times.

by: Tom Williams- Senior Editor, and Susan Wheeler-Managing Editor

The scene: The office of a modest-sized water treatment or bottled water dealership. It seems like it's humming along, but maybe every piece of the operation — sales, service, office, etc. — is working out of its own computer software "universe," each with a unique spreadsheet or mini-database.

Managers and employees may be communicating well in person with each other and with customers, but are their computer systems talking to each other, and can employees find all the data they need?

As your water business works harder to keep up in this year's moribund economy and get ready for the eventual upturn, you're looking for ways to manage costs. Payroll is a big chunk of your cost structure, so it behooves you to make the most efficient use of employee time. Vehicle fuel costs are giving you a big headache, so you don't want service or delivery vehicles wandering off course or making unnecessary trips. And should office employees have to rekey everything several times?



The right software package helps manage the business from the office and the field.

Images courtesy MTP Software, LLC

Updating or installing the latest advances in business software, while itself a cost factor initially, may pay big dividends sooner than you think.

With an updated, integrated system, "There is no more duplicate keying, there is no more forgetting to move something from one spreadsheet to the next. It's all just flowing and tied together," says **Frank Cincotta, founder and CEO of MTP Software, LLC**, Natick, MA, which supplies software services to water treatment industry



businesses.

You may already have some level of computerization, but remember that "software grows up" and keeps adding more helpful features, says Andrew Kuneth, vice president of Prism Visual Software, Inc., Port Washington, NY, which also designs and markets software to water treatment dealerships and others.

Software supermarket

As a water treatment or bottled water business, you'll want to look for system features that manage several or many of the following:

- Pre-ordered deliveries (perhaps salt)
- Route sales and mapping
- Equipment service scheduling (routine, troubleshooting or emergency)
- Customer account, billing and collection information
- Sales lead management and follow-up
- Equipment inventory tracking
- Call center management.

That's not an inclusive list, but your budget and specific needs will determine how many features you will have with a software upgrade. For many water treatment businesses, such an upgrade can "extend their office out into the field" with the help of laptops or handheld devices used by field personnel, says Prism's Kuneth.

Tame profit-eaters

Unnecessary service callbacks or repeat customer visits can be real profit-eaters. If you have people out making daily service calls, there could be significant payback from a software upgrade, **Cincotta** says.

Even the most experienced service techs from time to time want to be able to ask, "I'm having this problem out here. Has anybody else ever seen this?"

With the right system, "I'm able to have a lot of intelligence walking in the door that folks haven't had in the past," says **Cincotta**. "I'm able to access in real-time, so I can do a search on the knowledge base to say, 'Hey, has anybody encountered this problem in the past?' I can pull back that information in real-time from the customer site."

Sharing the knowledge

With some systems, field employees can communicate with each other and a company database, **Cincotta** said. After a serviceperson has put out an inquiry about, say, a malfunctioning pump, they might learn from the data system that, as he puts it, "four other folks in four different instances have encountered a seal problem with that pump, and here is how that's been serviced in the past."

Cincotta said the systems he provides can be either hosted or delivered, meaning that the data can originate from the software service company's mainframe or from the dealer's computers. For a very small dealership, **Cincotta** says it may be easier to have a company like **MTP** host the data system.

Sales or service managers and office personnel can use new software products to avoid the traditional "pull process" of sifting through paper records to see who needs to be serviced when. Some software systems will not only capture the last service call, but also will "know" when the next scheduled service is supposed to occur and automatically drop it on a schedule.

From back office to delivery

While many software companies don't sell their services exclusively to water businesses, their products may be flexible enough to apply to many types of service businesses. Billing and scheduling can be handled with systems "all the way back through the back office" of the

dealership, as needed, **Cincotta** says. Route management for, say, bottled water deliveries, is a key operation requiring “smart” software. Again, payback in an era of soaring vehicle fuel costs could be quick.

Optimization on the front (vehicle) end brings handheld capabilities into play, **Cincotta** says. *“I’m out in the field and I’m able to be in my Smartphone, access the knowledge base, complete a [paperless] service ticket directly from there, and have it in real-time feedback to the system beyond.”*

Kuneth offers another advantage. An integrated system helps control inventory, including your equipment, “where it’s treating your trucks as a warehouse.”

On the sales and marketing side, you can find systems that manage your dealership’s lead generation or its “outbound” communications by, say, sending promotional e-mail blasts or newsletters to customers. Some systems can even capture selected customer groups and send blasts only to those groups.

What to look for

How do you, who’s a water treatment expert but maybe not so expert at computers, shop for a business software upgrade?

“One of the questions is how progressive is that software company in keeping up-to-date with the latest and greatest technology?” says Prism’s Kuneth. “Are they built on [a] scaleable platform? Do they have customers smaller and larger than me? And can they provide me with handheld technologies and other technologies that you can use in the field to connect my field into my office, removing my paperwork?”

Cincotta advised steering clear of providers that want to simply hand over a CD, then “give you a ‘Good luck.’” Instead, find a provider that offers more of an end-to-end service, which might include converting and cleaning existing company data, training your employees to use the software and then giving ongoing support. If you run a small company that doesn’t have sophisticated technology users, ongoing support is as critical as buying a good software product, software vendors say.

Software providers can also be a big help with computer hardware, according to **Cincotta**. Hardware decisions are based on the size of the company, how it’s going to use the software, and its growth prospects.

Growth and change in your company means more than just adding customers or buying the latest tank valve — you also need to take advantage of your software provider’s periodic updates. Ask the provider about the availability of enhancements and upgrades.

Making the transition

Many water businesses may already be using off-the-shelf software like Quickbooks, but some more advanced systems can be integrated fairly easily into these more basic programs, according to **Cincotta**.

Transitioning from what you’re using (say, a couple of spreadsheets in a 10-person dealership) to more advanced, integrated business software might take a few months from the time you write a check to the software company to the time you go “live” with your new system, according to **Cincotta**.

Costs can vary widely, but can be less than \$25,000 depending upon a dealership’s size and needs, he says. Some companies sell their products in modules that a small business could purchase for as little as \$10,000.

An upgrade should pay off well. As Kuneth likes to say about his product, “It allows you to control all parts of the business and increase efficiencies in the office and in the field. In

software, it's all about managing your business and the data of that business. And if you can do that more effectively, you've reduced your costs."

Additional information for this article was provided by software companies KDS Moses, Inc. (Water-tight®), Cascade, WI, and Commercial Business Systems (WaterSoft-Ware®), Marion, IN.