



Execution enabled

From automated staff scheduling to cutting out paper transactions, technology in the connected store can help managers execute one-off operations and thus free up quality time to spend with customers, discovers Mark Webb

The store is on the front line of any retailer's operation and the staff put it all into action: the ambience, branding, layout and stock availability. How can technology help? At a strategic level, the connected store is now prevalent. Some areas of EMEA don't have broadband that is reliable or cheap enough, but these areas are in the minority and the infrastructure is being put in place.

Windows operating systems embedded in POS (WEPOS, XP, Vista) and in hand-held devices (CE, XP) provide the basis for an 'intelligent' store. Plug and play helps retailers keep down hardware costs because they can choose the closest match to their requirements without having to consider compatibility. Printer manufacturers such as Star, Citizen and Epson, also certify their products for use with these operating systems. In order to take further advantage

of the connected store, Microsoft is working with ARTS to develop standards that will allow POS units to seek out and connect to peripherals on the wireless network.

A retailer's IT department, connected to remote stores via broadband, can use Microsoft System Center to control and secure the many devices in store, from the POS unit to staff's PDAs, to the manager's smartphone. This leaves the store staff free from IT concerns and ensures compliance across the retailer's estate.

Lester Aderem from Argility points out that the devices in store are mainly transactional, gathering data from sales, scanning, loyalty cards, or stock-related data. Transactional information passes from the store to the ERP system at head office, and back to the store in the form of job-useful information for managers, for example alerts about impending out of stocks.

Aderem says that the trend is towards using technology to empower store managers by providing information in the form of digital dashboards. These graphically display high-level information and allow the manager to drill down for more detail. The latest version of Active Retail – Argility's POS application – allows a retailer to create dashboards through simple drag and drop of data items and workflow rules.

Soft-configured workflow engines can seek out anomalies, says Aderem. Managers at head office level and regional level can provide the operational parameters within which the store should work. The workflow engine helps the store manager by drawing his or her attention to exceptions and creating to-do lists.

At a development level, Aderem says it's

WHEN YOU ARE SERVING A CUSTOMER THROUGH A PDA OR THE POS YOU CAN CHECK AVAILABILITY IN REAL TIME BOTH IN YOUR STORE AND OTHERS NEARBY

Cesare Dania
Reprosoft

kiosks and intelligent shopping carts.

Cesare Dania at Reprosoft notes the use of PDAs in the fashion store, when a customer may like a style and colour but not have immediate access to the correct size: "When you are serving a customer and the clothes he tries on don't fit, through a PDA or the POS you can check in real time the availability of the clothes in different sizes or colours, or similar items, both in the store and in other stores nearby. In this way you can very quickly answer the needs of customer."

Act'o-soft has integrated Windows-based PDA, POS and a large screen display to recommend items of clothing that match a customer choice or purchase. If a customer buys trousers then the catalogue may recommend a belt, a top, shoes or other accessories. Photos of models wearing these items appear on the large screen. The same display can be shown to the customer on the POS screen and the POS operator can switch between ordering information and photo display. The purchase can also trigger a brief, optional, customer questionnaire designed to help develop private brand or partner brand fashions. Act'o-soft's POS sits on an OPOS layer and transacts in real time with Circon's Dynamics AX ERP solution.

VCS Timeless is planning a new release of Columbus Retail Pocket, a mobile point of sale and CRM application, for June. Sales assistants can use Retail Pocket on a PDA to re-edit price tags for on the spot markdowns, stock look-ups and merchandise reception. Ladieswear retailer Caroll, part of Vivarté Group, has recently rolled out Retail Pocket to 250 of its stores in record time. The product allows workers to re-label 3,000 articles in the space of two hours, following an hour's training.

Paul Makin at K3 thinks that mobile hardware has now become affordable for retailers and that adoption is spreading. Importantly, the retailer can use the same device for different functions. In the past a retailer bought a stocktaking solution and that came with its own hand-held device; but that's all it did. Now with a standard operating system, you can use the same physical device for stock counting, goods receipt and so on.

Makin adds that the use of mobile provides flexibility in the store space. People have been used to fixed counters and POS, but with wireless and mobile technology, you can think differently.

Retailers can use the connected store to differentiate themselves by being more creative to drive sales of certain products at certain times and to sell space to brand owners. K3 has recently linked up POS and digital signage, building in a program that triggers automatic promotions if a product

hasn't sold as expected. The digital signage communicates the special offer to the customers and the system will turn the promotion off again once sales hit a certain threshold. This is organised up front and the trigger preloaded.

New mobile terminals and kiosks from companies such as Wincor Nixdorf are multimedia-compatible and provide numerous options for improving services and directly communicating and interacting with customers.

For example, participants in frequent shopper programmes can now prepare shopping lists at home and forward them to the store via text message, where they use them at a mobile terminal on site. When customers identify themselves with their customer cards, the system presents their shopping lists and a shop map, including store guidance functions to help them find the desired products in the store without delay.

The mobile terminals also speed up the checkout process for customers, who can scan the goods themselves directly at the shopping trolley and then pay for them at a self-service payment terminal.

The software for Wincor Nixdorf's mobile solutions, which is based on the TP.net technology, controls the different devices. Due to the open system architecture, TPISHOP hardware and software can be easily integrated in store solutions and POS applications.

The range of solutions is supplemented by wireless infrastructure components and special racks for issuing the mobile terminals. The TPISHOP portfolio includes mobile sales assistants – mobile terminals for the sales staff – which can be used to retrieve additional information.

Rugged PDAs, used for warehouse type operations in the past, are also making their way into the store. Hoefft & Wessel's Skeye.pad POS unit has a large screen so that it can display a typical POS button layout, and it runs Windows CE and .NET for easy integration. Hoefft & Wessel has combined its Skeye.pad with access control to create a self-checkout solution. The customer uses a stored value card to pay for goods scanned and the system grants automatic egress.

Electronic shelf-edge labels are also coming into the right price area for retailers to consider them a worthwhile return on investment. Staff can take the initiative in store and reprogram the price labels to promote certain products. The Nordic PDA, in its latest Windows Mobile version, works with Episys software to allow staff to reprogram labels from the PDA. The amended price data is sent to the POS system first and then on to the labels so there is no disconnect between systems.



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