

Applications for hand-helds speed billing, cut paperwork

Alex L. Goldfayn

Published September 17, 2005

Mark Harris
Chief information officer
Prairie Farms
Carlinville, Ill.

Even when computers became commonplace, delivery drivers for dairy producer Prairie Farms still wrote up orders with pen on paper. "The drivers would write all the delivery quantities on paper printouts and they'd have to multiply it by the prices and figure it all out by hand," said Mark Harris, chief information officer for the dairy producer in Carlinville, Ill., halfway between Springfield and St. Louis.

Sometimes the math was wrong. And sometimes people at the office simply couldn't read the drivers' writing. "And usually the office people wouldn't see the driver until the next afternoon, or sometimes even two days later, to ask about it," Harris said.

So last year, Prairie Farms went looking for a solution that would decrease the paperwork and increase the accuracy of their drivers' record keeping. They turned to Apacheta Corp., which is based in San Diego but recently opened an office in Hoffman Estates. Apacheta (www.apacheta.com) writes software for industrial hand-held devices, similar to those used by package delivery companies like UPS.

Now, when making deliveries, Prairie Farm drivers are armed with a device loaded with that day's deliveries. "The driver comes in at 4 a.m. to start his route and takes his hand-held and then goes out to deliver his route," Harris said. "At each store, he drops off his orders and keys in the items that have been delivered." Once the delivery is made, the driver goes back to the truck, connects the hand-held to a printer, and a "ticket," or receipt, is generated as a paper record of the transaction. "When he's done for the day, he puts his hand-held back in the jack, where it connects to our server in the office and the server downloads the deliveries."

John Major, CEO at Apacheta, said carmakers find his company's programs especially useful. "Car manufacturers want to know exactly when a car is delivered so they can bill for it," Major said. "The process is prone to error unless it can be automated." Most manufacturers contract with delivery companies to move their cars from the factory to dealerships. "So these delivery companies need to provide information about when the deliveries are made so the manufacturers can get paid."

Major said the automated process reduces billing time from three days to about two hours. Here's how the process works: The driver scans each car's vehicle identification number with the hand-held upon loading. "He gets to the dealer and takes the cars off," Major said. "The dealer agrees he got the car. Then, just like with the UPS guy, he signs his name on the hand-held. Then, using a wireless wide-area [or cellular] network, the hand-held sends that to the manufacturers, which can now send the bill."

Apacheta, which launched in 2003, provides software for companies using between 100 and 5,000 hand-held devices. It handles only the software for the hand-helds, which are made by other companies.

The average cost for the software is about \$400 to \$600 per device. The 20-person company expects to generate about \$5 million in revenue this year and between \$10 million and \$20 million next year.