



Success on the flower market with mobile technology

The challenge:

To implement an easily manageable mobile connection between drivers and the company's central system in a short time, in order to guarantee cost transparency from the receipt of orders to sales, and to insure optimal inventory control at all times.

The solution:

For mobile process completion, Omnimove has made some customized adjustments to expand its standard Orderforce solution. The product is based on M-Business Anywhere from iAnywhere Solutions.

Results:

Faster and almost error-free delivery and order handling; a flexible solution with the potential to integrate additional processes; return on investment is expected within 6 months.

Industry:

Trade, logistics

Systemkonfiguration:

- Handheld Symbol PDT 8037 - with Pocket PC 2003 operating system
- Symbol Route printer RT 1000
- M-Business Anywhere (server), synchronization

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Frits Bleichrodt
A. van Delft International

Today, flowers represent a global billion-dollar industry. In 2000, the market for cut flowers and potted plants reached an estimated total of 6.8 billion euro in global sales. Germany is one of the most important core marketplaces. More than a third of all cut flowers are sold in Germany. Each German spends almost 85 per cent on cut flowers and potted plants. The flower market will continue to grow, and by 2012 should surpass today's values by 45 percent, according to the latest prognosis of the Dutch Flower Office (BBH), the marketing and sales promotion organization of the Dutch ornamental plant sector. The Netherlands is the indisputable global market leader among flower exporters, and according to the prognosis, its market share will continue to grow: it should reach up to 40.2 percent for cut flowers in 2007.

The flower trade as a logistical challenge

An immense amount of logistical efforts is needed to make sure that tulips from Amsterdam, roses from Africa and exotic orchids from South America reach the customer fresh. A. van Delft International B. V., one of the leading suppliers of cut flowers in the Netherlands, focuses primarily on service, automation and modern technology. That's the only way to achieve high quality standards and speedy, accurate deliveries. The company, founded in 1954, operates in Europe and the U.S. with 20 staff members. In 2001 A. van Delft International

has achieved sales of approximately 14 million. The company's strength is due primarily to a technological edge over the competition. For example, the officials in charge backed e-commerce early on, and have embedded all business activities in a comprehensive IT strategy. Through an automatic order system, customers have a constant overview of the entire range of products and of current prices. Orders are sent directly to the logistics system and to processing at A. van Delft International. At the flower auction, buyers can always have an exact overview of the inventory, and can act without delay when, for example, the inventory sinks below a predetermined minimum. Customers can track their order online any time until it is delivered. "The greatest challenge is posed by flexible flower prices at the auctions, which can change from one day to the next," Frits Bleichrodt of A. van Delft International explains. "If merchandise is purchased at one price and sold at another, a margin is created that is difficult to control. With perishable goods, like flowers, inventory must be minimal. The more precise control we have over our inventory at all times, the more targeted our purchases can be and the more profitably we can work."

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Joost Reitsma
Founder and Director
of Omnimove

In the past, each process was represented digitally. However, this chain of information stopped at the moment when the flowers were loaded on the truck. In the truck, information was present only in the form of lists on paper. All customers who did not order online were ex-

cluded from the integrated recording of orders. Up to now, written orders from these mostly smaller flower shops were collected by the drivers of the delivery trucks on their routes. At the end of the route, the slips of paper were handed in at the office, where they were entered manually into the back-office system. As a result, in case of larger orders or periodic fluctuations the buyer was no longer able to react immediately, only with at least a day's delay. In addition, a reliance on slips of paper led to many mistakes due to lost, incomplete, illegible or erroneously completed records.

Faster process completion

In discussions with the system integrator Omnimove, a subsidiary of Reitsma Telecom B.V., the introduction of electronic inventory updates via a mobile application emerged as a possible solution. Omnimove had already implemented a back-office system, a customized installation of the ERP solution by Magic Software Enterprises, and as a result was given the assignment to design the mobile solution. For cost and performance considerations, an "always online" solution was quickly rejected in favor of a combined online-/offline solution. "Since the drivers are always en route, and since the transactions in question are sensitive, an always online connection was unacceptable to us," Joost Reitsma, founder and director of Omnimove recalls. "If data cannot be stored locally, no one will know which data have already been transmitted and which ones haven't, should the connection break down."

After a detailed market assessment, the Omnimove team decided to use M-Business Anywhere by iAnywhere Solutions as the server platform for the mobile system extension. With M-Business Anywhere, Web-based applications and contents can be made available for mobile devices without reprogramming. A local database on the mobile device contains information on all customers and a list of merchandise with more than 1500 different flowers. All transactions can be performed independently of a network connection, and as a result they are "always available."

The application for A. van Delft is based on Order Force, a standard solution completed by Omnimove in the middle of 2003. Only ten man-days were needed for the customization. The mobile hardware to be used will include a printer/PDA combination by Symbol: a PDT 8037-Handheld with Pocket PC 2003 operating system, and the Route Printer RT 1000. Although there are handier mobile printers using thermal technology, van Delft needed a larger paper format and invoices printed with several copies, so that in the end a matrix printer was chosen. The greatest challenge of the project was presented by the integration of the printer. "The M-Business Anywhere

client usually does not offer a print function," Joost Reitsma explains. "We solved the problem with an in-house development in C++."

For the drivers, the new application means considerable relief: In the morning they synchronize the devices and receive the data for their route. With the Symbol handheld they can immediately print an invoice for the customer at the time of delivery, and can digitally accept new orders on site. When they start a new data synchronization, the new information is transmitted to the back-office server, and is immediately available to buyers at the auction, who can now react to the new orders. Based on the purchase prices and a number of other factors, at the end of the day the system calculates the current price of each flower for the next day. "Time is money - this is especially true in our industry," Bleichrodt comments. "By employing innovative mobile technology, we create a competitive advantage that will also benefit our customers."

Mobile plans continue

Omnimove and A. Van Delft have already planned to further extend the applications: Not only the drivers, but the buyers on location should also use the mobile devices. Instead of committing the inventory to paper and subsequently transferring it to a PC, orders could be recorded and submitted immediately with a handheld device on location. In this way, through the connection to the back-office system at A. van Delft International, customers will have almost immediate access to the flower auction, as if they were trading there themselves.

"With the scalable and flexible software of iAnywhere we were easily able to create a customized solution for our industry in an extremely short time," Reitsma said. "Based on the good experience we had, we will continue to rely on iAnywhere."

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