



I B Solutions

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ANALYSIS

AN OPEN APPROACH TO SYSTEM INTEGRATION

by Paul Smith

“ Every five minutes that a salesman can save not hunting for keys but serving customers, creates opportunities ”

Auto retail executives are today responsible for specifying, managing and maintaining multiple standalone computer systems. Alongside the Dealer Management System (DMS) it is conceivable that a dealership might need to install and run systems for managing courtesy and loan cars, customer contact (CRM), key management, CCTV, barriers, vehicle orders, vehicle finance, websites, visitor management, service tracking and much more.

As dealerships become more sophisticated and complex places, now is the time to look very hard at integrating more of these

systems so that they work together to generate productivity and efficiency gains. This means re-using or 'sweating' investment in existing systems to deliver new solutions on top of the ones that are already in place.

For example, CCTV systems are increasingly 'going digital'. This means that the existing network and cabling infrastructure used for other IT systems can also be used to stream, manage and store video surveillance output.

These new IP surveillance cameras have open interfaces allowing applications such as Automatic Number Plate Recognition (ANPR) to be run in-camera, offering dealerships a lower cost alternative to more traditional physical security such as barriers, retractable posts and full 24/7 manned guarding cover.

Or, perhaps, an existing standalone text messaging solution and a DMS. It should be possible to link these two systems pretty easily to send a text message to every service customer after a service is complete to tell them their car is ready for collection. A further text a week later might thank them for their business or offer to book in the next service.

Examples like this are many and varied. But auto retailers need to identify system vendors and solution providers who are capable of knitting these systems together.

They must also be more than just good integrators. To make

progress in the dealership systems world they will need to be both patient and diplomatic in order to gain access to systems using proprietary software which does not readily 'talk to' other systems.

Many of the vendors we see in this market simply do not see it to be in their interests to open up their systems to integration. From their point of view, the less that is known about what is inside their mysterious 'black box', the better. In this way they can preserve product margins and minimise maintenance requirements - or so the thinking goes.

But this attitude is simply not sustainable when the power of integration is becoming so clear. One of the keys to positive customer experience is flexibility; being able to respond to specific customer requirements, some of which may even emerge after the original specification of the system.

A 'sell, dump and run' approach just does not cut it anymore if you want positive referrals. And when these positive referrals stop coming through, many vendors may find new business streams drying up altogether.

System providers need to consider two key areas if they are going to move away from this black box mentality. The first is, where possible, to use open interfaces: modern architecture to make solutions readily 'integrate-able' with other systems. If these system providers don't have the skill-sets in house, they need to go out and find them.

Secondly, have an open attitude: system providers need to be willing and interested in helping customers find solutions to specific business issues. It must be a passion - perhaps controversially, one that providers may have to explore outside of a traditional remuneration model; even free of charge.

This type of flexibility will ensure customer satisfaction and stimulate recommendations from auto retail operations, simultaneously pushing out competitors that are unwilling or unable to invest effort with the customer in the same way.

When you start on the 'open road' you will find opportunities everywhere in discussion with your systems providers or solution partners. But the trick is to get on that open road to search them out and find suppliers who are prepared to work together with you to create these solutions.

■ *Author, Paul Smith is managing director of iB Management Solutions, providers of the eTag Key Management System and other systems for auto retailers.*

THE DEALERSHIP EXPERIENCE

Where auto retailers have made the investment in a networked key management system they are seeing almost immediate productivity gains by integrating it with other dealership-based systems.

Networking of key management means that any authorised individual can log onto the PC-based interface to check where a set of keys are located or to find out who had them last. This means locating them quickly and efficiently, improving sales and after-sales team efficiency.

"Every five minutes that a salesman can save not hunting for keys but serving customers, creates opportunities for more sales and higher quality servicing," says Mark Reilly, Essex Auto Group finance director, who is one of our eTag key management system customers. There are other spin-off benefits too.

"For example we are developing a customer-facing screen showing specific vehicles we have prioritised for sale. By integrating this with the eTag key management system we will be able to show the customer exactly where the promoted vehicle is parked if they want to go and have a look. Effectively the system becomes a virtual sales assistant for us."