

GROWERTALKS

Features

5/29/2015

Moving Toward a More Mobile Business

Amanda Lamela

While it may seem as though every person in the United States owns a smartphone, a recent study shows that perception is not far from the truth.

A Pew Research Center study released in April found that nearly two-thirds of all U.S. adults own a smartphone, with much higher percentages of ownership reported by adults aged 18 to 49. The study also found that 67% of owners have used their smartphone for turn-by-turn navigation while driving and 57% used their smartphone for online banking.



With personal smartphone use growing in leaps and bounds (the Pew study noted only 35% of U.S. adults polled in Spring 2011 owned a smartphone), it's not surprising that people are expecting the same type of constant connectivity in their professional lives.

"Just like ATM machines and online banking modernized customer service for banks, customer service for business in general has been revolutionized by web-based customer self-service," said Darcy Boerio, the channel development manager of Website Pipeline in Greenville, South Carolina. "Consumers are used to self-serving in their private lives. Whether it's personal shopping or business-related purchases, consumers have come to expect to interact and conduct business anywhere, anytime and on any device with any company."

Because of the growing expectations of customers of both B-to-B and B-to-C businesses to have instant access, Website Pipeline went from providing universal website design and e-commerce solutions to focusing their services for companies that use an Enterprise Resource Planning system (see call-out).

"We started out just building websites, then one of our clients asked us to write an ERP integration," Darcy

said. “It was such a revelation for us when we saw how much more impactful the site was once it was integrated with the ERP system. Suddenly, just designing websites with no integration felt like we were only getting our clients part of the way there. Any business that wants to sell more while improving and streamlining customer service should be given all the advantages that integration has to offer.”



Enterprise resource planning

(ERP) is business management software—typically a suite of integrated applications—that a company can use to collect, store, manage and interpret data from many business activities, including product planning and cost; manufacturing or service delivery; marketing and sales; inventory management; and shipping and payment.

Growers want anytime access to their own data, too

Many businesses are starting to recognize not only the need to provide accessibility to their customers, but also the need to have instant availability to their own information from any location. The horticulture industry is no exception, according to Greg Lafferty, senior account manager at Practical Software Solutions in Concord, North Carolina.

“Growers want to be mobile,” Greg said. “Technology is constantly changing. It is important for growers to be empowered to keep up with those changes and take advantage of tools to help their business operate more efficiently.”

This year, Practical Software Solutions is launching Grower Vertical for a Sage ERP system written entirely in HTML5. This means the entire ERP system—not just a few applications—is accessible from any device that can support a web browser, whether it’s a desktop PC or Mac, a laptop, a smartphone or a tablet. Practical will debut Grower Vertical on this web-native platform at the Solutions Marketplace at Cultivate’15 in Columbus, Ohio, in July.

“A web-native system allows the user to access their business information anywhere, anytime and from any connected device,” said Greg. “This is especially important to organizations operating multiple facilities, operations with remote employees or businesses on the go.”

By having remote access to the entire ERP system, a controller can check on a month-end financial report if she’s home sick. Or an inventory manager can verify the quantity of impatiens in the greenhouse scheduled to be ready by the third week in May, even though he’s on vacation. Or a salesperson can show a customer their purchase history while on location at their site.

Growers already benefitting from web-native platforms

DemandLink, which was developed in 2008 by Green Market Systems in conjunction with Oregon State

University, has grown to become the largest provider of replenishment and live goods point-of-sale analytics in the United States. Using more than 35,000 data points covering weather, housing starts, employment figures, big-box retailer information and more, DemandLink provides simple and robust forecasting, replenishment and business intelligence tools to the live goods industry, all on a web-native platform.

John Garren, CEO of Green Market Systems, said there were three goals they wanted to accomplish by developing DemandLink as a web-native program.

“First, we wanted to save our customers money by eliminating the need for on-premises installation and management of our software,” John said. “We also wanted to allow users to access up-to-date data wherever they have Internet connection. Then we wanted to meet the needs of a mobile and seasonal workforce through ease of scalability.”

In July 2014, Practical Software Solutions and Green Market Systems announced a partnership to provide seamless integration between DemandLink and Grower Vertical for Sage ERP. Greg said the partnership was a case of not needing to re-invent the wheel.

“We had customers approach us to develop a forecasting and replenishment system over the years,” Greg said. “We did our own research into the marketplace and found that DemandLink was a leader with solid technology and a great leadership team.”

Young’s Plant Farm, located in Auburn, Alabama, has already taken advantage of this partnership. A customer of Practical Software Solutions since 2010, Young’s integrated DemandLink with their Grower Vertical for Sage ERP in January.

“Inside the office, we are using DemandLink for all performance analysis and customer-level inventory management,” said Chris Montgomery, the senior account executive for Young’s. “Also, we have been working with DemandLink to create a customized replenishment tool that shows all decision variables in a very user-friendly work environment. This spring, we have been replenishing customers using this tool for a significant portion of our business.”

Because of its web-native platform, Chris said their outside sales staff uses tablets to access DemandLink when they’re away from the office. And much like the staff at Website Pipeline discovered with their customers, the integration between Grower Vertical for Sage ERP and DemandLink has improved and streamlined Young’s customer service.

“This allows (our outside sales staff) the ability to have real-time access to reporting while visiting with customers,” Chris said. “It is invaluable to be able to sit with a customer and have the ability to data mine performance data for multiple timeframes across 400-plus SKUs. They can answer questions in a way that truly makes them the experts in the field.” **GT**

Amanda Lamela is the marketing director for Practical Software Solutions.