

Blue Rhino Links Propane Distributors With Retailers Through Durable, Portable System

featuring microFlash 3t thermal printers
portable route accounting for retail ■ ■ ■



Blue Rhino Corporation supports a network of distributors which operate a propane cylinder exchange service for retailers such as Home Depot, Lowe's and Wal-Mart. More than 400 field reps fan out daily to many of the 30,000 locations throughout the contiguous United States plus Puerto Rico to service cylinder cages located in the front of the stores. Based in Winston-Salem, NC, Blue Rhino provides marketing, financial and IT support to these partners so they can deliver their product.

An important part of this process is providing the drivers with a portable route accounting system that tracks all activity for the field service rep. Most critically, the rep must be able to produce a detailed delivery receipt for the retailer that also can serve as an invoice if required.

Problem ■ ■ ■

Blue Rhino needed to make sure reps had the tools necessary to deliver that information reliably, accurately and in the right format to both their company's main database and the retailer. And, like most route accounting applications, cylinder exchange is rough work, so the tools reps use to get that job done need to withstand punishment. With reps hauling 40-pound cylinders in and out of trucks and cage, it's more than obvious any tools Blue Rhino provided its reps had to be portable and ruggedly reliable.

Solution ■ ■ ■

Blue Rhino hooked up with another Winston-Salem company, Integrated Solutions International, LLC, to get the complete solution it needed. Integrated Solutions has specialized in providing workforce automation solutions since 1992. Its platform-independent Application Framework and MobileConX Communications Infrastructure products were used as a base to create a tailored route accounting solution for Blue Rhino. The field hardware solution features Datamax-O'Neil Product

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-Bob Travatello, CIO
Blue Rhino Corporation

development's microFlash 3t 3-inch-wide thermal printers. "We use Datamax-O'Neil printers exclusively in our applications," says Mike Sweeney, Vice President of Sales for ISI. "They run forever. At Blue Rhino, and it's been six years."

When Blue Rhino distributors hit the road, their goal is to be as efficient as possible while meeting customer needs. The typical day for a driver involves going to approximately 10 stores, filling the store-front cage to capacity with cylinders. Then, using Hand Held Products' Dolphin 7400 portable terminal, the rep accesses the retailer's account and records all activity such as number of cylinders exchanged and amount charged. The driver then uses a Datamax-O'Neil microFlash 3t printer to create a receipt containing that information which serves as a bill of lading or an invoice when needed. At the end of the day, drivers dial into Integrated Solutions' MobileConX Central server, using MobileConX communications software to upload the day's data into Blue Rhino's billing system, completing the information loop. At the same time, electronic versions of the printed field documents are uploaded and routed to a Blue Rhino intranet Web site for archival, reporting and retrieval. The document images are created in the hand held at the time of transaction using Integrated Solutions' DocMaster software, eliminating the need for labor-intensive document scanning.

The Datamax-O'Neil printer is a critical part of the system, says Blue Rhino CIO Bob Travatello. Previously, drivers dealt with a full-sized printer installed in their trucks which posed an assortment of challenges, from security issues to the amount of time drivers spent walking from the front of a store, where the cages are, to the back of the store, where the receiving offices are. "We wanted a portable solution where the distributor could carry the printer with him," says



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Travatello. Also, they needed to deal with as few consumables as possible and knew they wanted thermal printing. Finally, ruggedness was essential. "After all," he adds, "these reps are hauling 40-pound tanks around. They're not exactly careful. The durable Datamax-O'Neil printers gave us the portability and reliability we were looking for."

Results ■ ■ ■

The benefits are clear. Internally, Blue Rhino has gone paperless, and being able to transmit all the handheld's data directly into its systems means no rekeying of



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information, saving more time. "[Drivers] are more efficient, without a doubt," says Travatello. "The time savings, the footsteps saved, that's immense. After all, a company doesn't go from 2000 locations to 30000 locations without improving their efficiencies. This solution has helped Blue Rhino become very efficient with their deliveries." With the hand held, printer, electronics and accessories tucked inside a custom case, all the tools go where the drivers go and are at their fingertips when they need them. Drivers can use what they need at the point of activity and know each time those tools will perform for them without fail.

In the demanding environment, the reliable 3ts have been up to the task from day one. They have withstood the pressure, literally. "Some of the 400-plus units out in the field have actually been run over, and yet they still worked," states Travatello. "Every one of the original printers deployed six years ago is still out in the field. We've added units because we are growing, but we've never replaced any. That's quite a testament."

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