



TEPH SEAL

Gains Business Control With Mobile Computing, the 2,000-employee auto detailing company used a wireless handheld computing solution to regulate service processes for its regional workers, leading to 100% billing accuracy.

excerpted from Integrated Solutions, June 2008
 Written by: Ken Congdon

Empowering your employees to make key business decisions can be a vital step in improving company morale and ensuring organizational success. However, if employees are given free reign to make company decisions without the proper corporate controls in place, this practice can just as quickly lead to chaos. Teph Seal "Auto Appearance" realized the downside of giving its employees too much freedom. This provider of automobile detailing and refurbishing services endured years of billing and payroll inaccuracies as a result of human error and deceit due to its reliance on individual employees to complete manual service fulfillment processes. In response, the company implemented a mobile service management solution that allows the company to automate and track key service functions (e.g. time and labor management, billing) while ensuring corporate standards are adhered to. This initiative has resulted in visible improvements in billing accuracy and significant reductions in labor costs.

Manual Tracking Causes Billing, Payroll Problems

Many car dealerships throughout the United States consider automobile detailing and refurbishing to be a necessary hassle that takes time away from their core business of selling and servicing cars. Because of this, many dealers hire companies like Teph Seal to provide full-time detailing services for them. Teph Seal has nearly 2,000 employees working for approximately 400 car dealerships in 12 states, and these employees actually work inside the four walls of the dealerships that are their clients.

For 26 years, Teph Seal used manual paper-based processes to keep track of service fulfillment, customer billing, and employee payroll. For example, Teph Seal employees at each dealership would manually record the VIN (vehicle identification number) of the cars they detailed, the services that were provided (e.g. exterior wash, fabric guard, interior detailing, etc.), the employee who performed the service, the labor time required to perform the service, and the cost to bill the dealer on a

paper log form. These forms were faxed to a Teph Seal regional VP who would compile and manually enter the information from multiple dealerships on an Excel spreadsheet, which was then sent to the corporate office on a weekly basis.

This manual system posed several problems for Teph Seal. First, human error resulted in billing inaccuracies that cost the company thousands of dollars in revenue on a monthly basis. For example, an employee could easily record a VIN incorrectly on the log form. When this occurred, a dealer would deny ownership of the vehicle referenced and refuse to pay for the services provided. Similarly, employees would also accidentally record data for the same vehicle twice, causing the client to be double-billed.

Another problem resulted from the slow process of physically transporting data in paper form. "Between the dealership, the regional VPs' desks, and the ultimate arrival of the service spreadsheets at the corporate office, there were multiple places where the data we needed to bill the customer could be lost, misplaced, or held up," says John Tricoli, president of Teph

Seal. "Corporate accounting employees used to make dozens of calls every week trying to track down paperwork we needed to bill our customers. This created delays in our billing cycle that negatively impacted our cash flow."

A final weakness of the manual system was that it allowed individual Teph Seal employees to take liberties with company processes. For example, Teph Seal managers at individual dealerships would sometimes ignore the established corporate rates for services and negotiate their own pricing with the dealership. This practice often resulted in billing discrepancies and unmet customer expectations. Furthermore, since payroll was done by hand, dealership managers could easily fudge the number of hours an employee worked, enabling themselves and other employees to be overpaid.

"[B]ecause human error has been eliminated from the process, we have been able to achieve 100% billing accuracy."
 - John Tricoli,
 President, Teph Seal

Handhelds provide automation and corporate control

By 2005, Teph Seal decided it was time to correct the problems related to the company's manual service tracking processes. The company evaluated some mobile technology options to see if they could help automate many of its existing service management functions while providing a level of corporate control. Teph Seal considered three mobile software packages and ultimately selected the PointSync Mobility Platform by MobileDataforce because the software was already in use by other companies in the automobile industry. PointSync already had a VIN database integrated with it that Teph Seal could use as the basis for its solution. Even with this VIN database as a starting point, automating Teph Seal's service management processes via a mobile computing application required a great deal of customization on the part of the software vendor.

After selecting PointSync as its software solution, Teph Seal turned its attention to choosing a handheld computer that would best complement its application and work environment. Since the handheld would be exposed to the water and chemicals used in auto detailing, MobileDataforce suggested that Teph Seal use the rugged WORKABOUT PRO handheld by Psion Teklogix.

Before committing to launch the solution companywide, Teph Seal first wanted to prove the solution would work using a dealership client in Knoxville, TN (the home of Teph Seal's director of IT) as a pilot site.

Once the solution was proved effective, Teph Seal initially rolled out the solution to its Charlotte, NC; Greensboro, NC; and Columbia, NC dealerships in September 2006.

"We started with the North Carolina region because these dealerships consistently had high payroll inconsistencies," says Dale Williams, director of IT for Teph Seal. "We schedule the rollout of the solution to other regions based on need as well.

However, we focus on newly established dealer locations first because we don't want new employees to learn our old manual process or adopt the bad habits that come with it."



Integrated Solutions Magazine
June 2008

As Teph Seal's director of IT, Williams has taken the lead in deploying the mobile solution at each Teph Seal location and trains the managers and assistant managers how to use the handhelds. He personally visits each location to get the system up and running and has created an online handheld training manual that employees can reference after he leaves. Williams also makes himself available by cell phone seven days a week for employees who require further support with the device.

Mobile technology reduces labor costs, billing cycles

To date, Teph Seal has deployed 85 WORKABOUT PRO handhelds equipped with the PointSync Mobility Platform in 75% of the dealerships it serves. The hard costs of the technology investment have been more than \$600,000, and the initiative has also caused the company to reinvest in its workforce.

"Our employees are auto detailers, and their level of computer knowledge varies greatly," says Williams. "A lot of our existing employees just couldn't adjust to using the handheld. These were good people and good detailers, but we had to make some changes in personnel. We were committed to our decision to adopt technology, and we needed the people on staff with the skill sets to operate it." While the costs have been significant, Teph Seal thinks the benefits of its mobile computing solution have been well worth it. Employees now use the handheld to scan the VIN bar code on the inside of a vehicle doorjamb to initiate a job. This scan automatically captures the car's year, make, and model, and the employee simply needs to enter the vehicle's color and stock number. A special program within the application prevents the handheld from scanning the same VIN twice, thus eliminating the possibility of double-billing a customer for the same vehicle.

Next, a series of five drop-down screens prompts the employee to input the detailer doing the job and to select the services being performed to the vehicle. Costs associated with each detailing service are programmed into the handheld application by corporate and cannot be changed by individual employees. Once service is completed, the dealer signs a signature screen to verify the work has been done to its satisfaction and to authorize billing. At the end of each workday, the data in the WORKABOUT PRO is downloaded to the PointSync server via a cradle, 802.11 Wi-Fi, or cellular connection.

This data is then accessible to all employees via a password-protected Web site. Furthermore, all billing data is automatically converted into a CSV (comma separated value) file that the corporate accounting department downloads into its Great Plains accounting system. This allows the accounting department to automatically generate invoices for dealers without the need to manually reenter the data into Great Plains.

“The automation capabilities of our handheld solution have allowed us to cut labor costs by 10% to 15%,” says Tricoli. “With our labor costs exceeding \$1 million a month, this solution will save us more than \$1 million in labor alone in its first year of use. The solution also enables us to receive 85% of our billing data the same day the service is performed as opposed to waiting weeks for service paperwork under our old method. Faster access to data enables us to bill customers in a more timely fashion, which improves our cash flow. Finally, because human error has been eliminated from the process, we have been able to achieve 100% billing accuracy.”

Teph Seal’s mobile solution also helps streamline key payroll processes. For example, the handheld serves as a time clock that punches employees in and out for their daily shifts. This data is also downloaded to the corporate network on a daily basis. This capability makes it more difficult for employees to manipulate the hours they work and protects Teph Seal from overpaying its staff.

According to Tricoli, the improved service tracking capabilities the handheld provides has elevated Teph Seal’s reputation with its clients and contributed to added business. “With the handheld application, we can now create service reports that detail

the services we provide our customers,” says Tricoli. “On one particular occasion, one of our service reports indicated that we were repeatedly detailing one vehicle an inordinate amount of times. It turns out an employee of the dealership was using the vehicle for their own personal transportation and putting the car back in the service line each day to be detailed. The dealer was so impressed we were able to alert him of this act that he contracted our services for the rest of his dealerships.”



“The automation capabilities of our handheld solution have allowed us to cut labor costs by 10% to 15%,” says Tricoli. “With our labor costs exceeding \$1 million a month, this solution will save us more than \$1 million in labor alone in its first year of use.