"The printers are wonderful. The drivers love them, and the learning curve wasn't steep at all....When we brought in the Datamax-O'Neil printers and had a couple of drivers try them, I was really impressed with the durability, the battery life, and the ease of operation. In the end, the decision was easy."

- Derick Hufstader
IT Director, Nevada Beverage Company

Founded in 1948, Las Vegas-based Nevada Beverage Company has been helping quench thirsts throughout Southern Nevada for over 50 years. The company—a major wholesaler of Anheuser Busch beers and distributor of non-alcoholic beverages including Monster energy drinks—covers over 40,000 square miles of the Silver State and has an annual sales volume of over 11 million cases.

"When you sell the volume of beverages that we do, you're generating a lot of invoices; until recently, that meant we were generating—and paying for—a lot of paper," says Derick Hufstader, IT director at Nevada Beverage. Hufstader explains this multidimensional IT issue at Nevada Beverage and how finding the right partners in Vermont Information Processing (VIP) and Datamax-O'Neil transformed not only the generation and consumption of paper at the company, but also saved time, improved accuracy, enhanced customer service, and generated better employee morale across multiple departments.

Problem ■ ■ ■

The problem was not simply the volume of paper invoices used on a daily basis, but also the documentation and processing of invoices, the amount of time route reconciliation was taking for drivers, and the accuracy of customer invoicing. "We were a bit old school," says Hufstader. "We'd run these invoices the same way for years; whether it was invoices or statements, we were printing a ton of paper."

Nevada Beverage used custom, two-part, tractor feed invoices that cost, on average, seven cents per copy. "We wanted to reduce that cost, as well as the filing and reconciliation associated with invoicing," Hufstader continues. "We also wanted to access all this data in a digital format, instead of going to a file cabinet, looking at each individual invoice, and checking for how it had

been signed and by whom. We needed to reduce the time involved. If the customer wanted a copy of an invoice, we didn't want to copy and fax it. We needed a better solution altogether."

Solution ■ ■ ■

Nevada Beverage turned to Colchester, Vt.-based Vermont Information Processing, an IT consultant specializing in work for beverage wholesalers. VIP had helped Nevada Beverage move from a custom IBM AS400 solution to a more robust beverage solution; turning to them was natural to Hufstader. "Among all the providers out there, we liked what they offered us," he says. VIP provided everything from electronic commerce to individual handheld computers used for driver sales, deliveries, or applications for the corporate sales department.

So Hufstader presented the invoicing problem to VIP. After analyzing the situation, they came back with a solution that used digital printing and mobile computing hardware with their installed beverage application to meet the requirements. VIP provided Nevada with options from various companies they partnered with, which they tested. "Because we live in a desert climate, we were skeptical about the affects of heat, and how things, such as battery life and durability, were going to work in our environment," says Hufstader.

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Durability, longevity, usability, and the ability to withstand heat were the characteristics that the new system had to have for drivers in the field. If the battery life wasn't good enough for the printers to last all day, then it would be pointless, because drivers have to plug them into the truck to make them work. The printers' operational life had to be four to five years to justify the investment in the hardware.

"Drivers aren't really soft on things," says Hufstader. "They're driving trucks in a brutal environment, and they're going to drop the printers. We tried other printers that we liked, but I didn't think they would deliver the longevity that we would get from the Datamax-O'Neil printers. When we brought in the Datamax-O'Neil printers and had a couple of drivers try them, I was really impressed with the durability, battery life, and ease of operation. In the end, the decision was easy."

The final solution Nevada Beverage selected uses VIP's software running on Motorola MC 75 Enterprise Digital Assistants and uses Bluetooth connectivity to Datamax-O'Neil's PrintPAD integrated printing system. The sleek design of the PrintPAD allows Nevada Beverage drivers to carry, charge, and communicate in a package that is ideal for route accounting and direct store delivery. It charges both the printer and the handheld, eliminating the need to purchase and maintain multiple A.C. adaptors and chargers. Key to Nevada Beverage is the integral Bluetooth option that gives drivers the ability to communicate with the printer wirelessly while on the move in the field.

"The printers are wonderful," says Hufstader. "The drivers love them. The learning curve wasn't steep, which was another concern of mine: How am I going to get drivers who have been doing this job for 20 years to move from paper invoices to a digital format? It took getting some buy in, but they fell right into place and actually like it now. I can't imagine going back to a paper invoice."

Results ■ ■ ■

In Nevada Beverage's process, the invoices are loaded to the handheld computers in the evening. "That's done at about 7 or 8 p.m.; that's when we decide which driver is going to deliver invoices to a particular array of customers," says Hufstader.

When the driver comes in the next morning, he prints from his handheld a summary that shows all the products that he will be taking out for the day. He then verifies the product that is on his truck before he takes it out, because he is solely responsible for all of them. This is signed off by the driver's supervisor to confirm that those

are the products leaving the warehouse. Then the driver goes to his first delivery stop and prints a "pick sheet" that tells the customer what is being delivered. The customer checks whether the price and quantity are correct. The customer agrees or disagrees with the delivery. If the customer agrees, the driver unloads the product. Once the product is unloaded, the driver moves further into the application on the handheld and indicates that the product has been delivered. The customer signs, and the invoice is printed with the signature captured. The driver hands the original to the customer, and then moves on to the next customer.

Hufstader references five prime benefits of eliminating the "old school" two-part paper invoice:

1. A significant reduction in the amount of paper being generated
2. Elimination of the need to manually file invoices
3. Significantly reduced time for route reconciliation upon driver check in
4. More accurate invoices delivered to customers
5. Increased employee morale across multiple departments

The most enjoyable benefit for Hufstader was one that surprised him. "It brought everyone closer together," he concludes. "It's made the drivers think about how they could make their next stop more efficient. When they get back to the warehouse, instead of just handing over a piece of paper and taking off, there's more of a cohesive and collaborative environment, with everyone working together. It's an intangible but absolutely palpable thing that I didn't expect to come out of this process."

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