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What's Your Bar Code Printing Knowledge Worth?

An integrator earns a \$30,000 bar code printer upsell by showing the benefits of XML (extensible markup language)-based printing.

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With all the talk about the benefits of open systems, you'd think that bar code printers would be as plug and play as any device that plugs into a serial port or USB port on a PC. After all, desktop printers are open. But, that's not the case with bar code printers. Each manufacturer uses its own proprietary print drivers. In a large manufacturing setting, for example, where multiple brands and types of printers are used, managing printer drivers can be a daunting task. Systems integrator Avalon Integration Inc. understands how frustrating this problem can be for its customers, and that's why it's discovered a solution to the problem.

Complement A Mobile Computing Sale With Integration Services

Avalon Integration was recently awarded a mobile computing installation contract with a North American manufacturer of packaging solutions used in consumer products (e.g. lotion dispensing pumps). The integrator helped the manufacturer replace its legacy PDTs (portable data terminals) with 40 Motorola MC9090G handhelds, and it also installed a wireless LAN (WLAN) infrastructure, which included two Motorola WS5100 wireless switches and two Motorola AP300 thin-client access points. "Prior to completing the project, we asked whether the customer had any other IT problems and learned that bar code label printing was a serious problem," says Michael Kula, a partner at Avalon Integration. Much like many suppliers to large companies, the manufacturer is often asked to apply customized compliance labels to its outbound shipments. Every time a client requested a new compliance label, a two-day IT project followed. First, an IT person gathered the customer's requirements and programmed the new label format into the company's SAP R/3 ERP (enterprise resource planning) system. Then, the new label template was created and tested. "The core of the problem was that the business logic of 'what data to print' and 'when to print' was intersected with the description of 'what the label should look like,'" says Kula. What's more, the company was planning a major ERP upgrade, and as a result, it was going to lock down its ERP solution and not permit any modifications for two years. "That meant the manufacturer wouldn't be able to add any new compliance labels during the upgrade," says Kula.

After consulting with the customer, Avalon Integration made a business case for upgrading the manufacturer's legacy printing solution with an XML-based printing solution. The solution comprised a combination of Avalon Integration professional services (e.g. installation and migration of logic within the ERP system), Zebra Technologies Z4Mplus printers and ZebraDesigner for XML bar code development software. "By using the XML printers and our standard SAP programs, we were able to separate the business content from the label presentation layer, which meant we no longer needed to modify the ERP system to add labels," says Kula. "Instead, we configured the ERP system to output data to the printers in a universal generic format and programmed the printers to handle the formatting."

The process of creating new compliance labels has been shortened from two days to about two hours. "The customer used to have to create a new label template every time, which required extensive coding," says Kula. "Now, since the content and presentation layers are separate, we can simply load a new format into the printers, identify the new format in the ERP system, and be done with it."

Avalon Integration's consultation efforts following the original mobile computing installation earned the integrator an extra \$30,000 in sales revenue. What's more, however, is the integrator strengthened its customer relationship and is able to use the success from this install as a reference for new prospects.

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