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SMART PHONES AND TABLETS:
GAME CHANGERS
for managing a vending business

By Paresh Patel, Contributing Editor

The 'remote desktop' takes multi-tasking to a higher level and creates a host of new efficiencies in running a vending operation, a progressive operator finds.

If you're an entrepreneur, one of the reasons you went into business in the first place was to have more freedom — the freedom to do what you want, when you want, how you want, and with whom you want. Ironically, not too long after you're in business, you have less freedom than if you were an employee for someone else.

Couple that with communications technology — we're getting so connected that even when we're home or out of the office, we're always connected to the business. Technology that was supposed to help us become more productive and provide some additional freedom has simply tied us down more!

My goal in writing this article is to share how I use my iPhone and iPad to improve my productivity and hopefully provide a little more freedom. While I will cite specific examples, it is not intended to be a guide to implement the technologies — rather a means to show you what is possible.
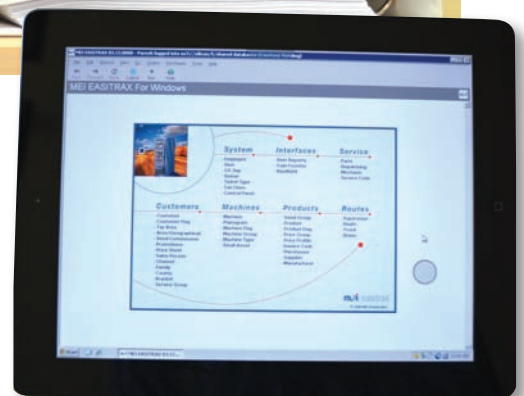
The thrust of innovation in the vending industry is focused around route operations — cashless, DEX, pre-kitting, dynamic scheduling, vending management software (VMS), and the like. This is rightfully so because route operations are our core activity. But route operations are just a part of our overall work and effort.

Remote desktop allows MEI Easitrax to run on an iPad, shown at right.

Consumer technology advances

The technology in the consumer marketplace has evolved at an incredibly fast pace. Five years ago, very few people had smart phones; there was no iPhone, no iPad, no Netbook, and mobile Internet was not widely used. These technologies are economical and can provide a huge

CyberAudit can be accessed via a virtual private network using Safari.

value in the vending company if properly utilized.

If you already have an iPhone, you are probably using it at minimum for email, calendar, contacts, pictures, and directions. Those are the most basic uses for the device (in addition to making calls.).

At my company, we use MEI Easitrax for our VMS. I don't know of any VMS that has an iPad or iPhone app — wouldn't that be useful if they did? But look at the picture on the opposite page below – I am running the full version of MEI Easitrax on my iPad. How's this possible?

One of the absolutely essential applications on my iPad is Jump Desktop — it is a remote desktop client (there are many others). With Jump Desktop, I can remotely connect to my desktop computer (or any computer in my company, including servers) from anywhere.

When connected to my computer, I can use it like I was in front of it and run any application, including my MEI Easitrax.

Remote desktop protocol

The remote desktop protocol is available for both the iPad and the iPhone. The iPhone screen is small, but it still allows me to do critical things like reschedule an account, look up a service call, change the handheld download date, etc. With the iPad, the Easitrax experience is almost the same as if it were on a desktop.

With Jump Desktop I can run any other application too. About 99 percent of my server maintenance is done through remote desktop because it typically has to be done when no one is at the office. Remote desktop allows me the freedom to work on the server at 10 p.m. at night from home.

It is one of the biggest time savers for me and allows me to multi-task. I have literally fixed a handheld download date or other issues from bed at 4 a.m. when a driver has called about a problem, saving me a trip in.

Change electronic locks

We have electronic locks on all our machines and all our facility doors. CyberAudit is a critical component to our business. While CyberAudit does not have an iPhone app, I access it more on my iPhone than on my desktop computer because inevitably I need to make permission changes when I'm not in the office. For security reasons, only two people in my company have access to the CyberAudit database, and this works well because I can do almost everything I need to do remotely.

To connect to CyberAudit Web, we don't need to use remote desktop software (although you could do it that way, too). I simply connect to my work network through a virtual private network (VPN) connection and in Safari navigate to the same address I would if I were on my computer.

I saved the Web page shortcut to the iPhone home screen so it actually looks and is accessed just like an app, even though it is not. It works through Safari quite well.

Just a couple weeks ago, I was in my car heading back to the office when I got a text message from my office with a problem. It said the janitorial crew was there and my office was locked and so they weren't going to clean it this week.

Well, I wanted my office cleaned! But I was still 45 minutes away. So I said, "Give me three minutes. I'll pull over and set your key to open my office for today." So I pulled over, took out my iPhone and gave my office staff's key access to open my office so the crew could clean it. Problem solved.

Obviously, this is a simple problem, but nonetheless, it shows

you how it can be used. I have done similar things for route keys and machine access. I'm hoping someday Videx builds an IR encoder that can connect to the iPhone via Bluetooth or wi-fi so we can actually use it to sync keys in the field too. We currently do sync keys in the field with Netbook computers, but it would be much more convenient to do so with an iPhone.

Syncing a key in the field in itself is a time and cost saving for us when there are problems. Our technicians have Netbooks issued to them and they have an IR encoder that plugs into the USB port.

If a key dies in the field, or we need to change permissions for whatever reason, we can save the effort of having the driver come back. We dispatch a tech to them and have the key renewed in the field. This has been a huge lifesaver when the drivers have been 45 to 60 minutes away, but the technicians have been much closer to them.

How to sync all devices

DropBox is something you install on your computer first. Basically it is a folder on your desktop that stays in sync across all your devices. It is like having a USB drive with files, but not requiring the physical drive. I use six computers and devices on a regular basis. Any file in that folder stays in sync across all my devices seamlessly and automatically.

While DropBox has an app for the iPhone that allows you to access all documents in that folder, I rarely use the app. Rather, they provide other apps the ability to access and upload documents to the DropBox and that is the way I use it most.

For example, I have in the DropBox every proposal I am working on, every presentation for the past few months, every important document I could possibly need in the field. Even more advanced, you can create a "briefcase" in the DropBox folder (using Windows technology) to sync files in the DropBox

from across the internal network. In other words, you don't need the original file there.

I use OneNote to take notes on my iPhone. The OneNote app syncs over the air with OneNote on my computer so it is a really nice and seamless way to keep the notes synchronized. OneNote allows me to insert pictures in-line with the notes, so it is much better than the default Notes app.

There are two regular uses for me. First, as all the brokers that visit me know, I take all my meeting notes on the device. To speed up note taking, I use a Bluetooth keyboard. When the brokers show me new products, I take pictures of them with my iPhone. I also take pictures of brochures, pre-order forms, and promotion flyers. I like to keep all information in one place.

When I'm done, by the time I head to my computer, all the information is there. I then can send my notes to anyone else in the company via email. Another neat feature of

Netbook allows electronic keys to be renewed in the field.

OneNote on the computer is that it can even search text-in images.

The other way I use OneNote is when I am doing site visits for new or prospective customers. I can track all my notes and take pictures of machines and locations. It works out very well.

How Courtesy Vending uses Easitrax in the field

One of the most important aspects of running a vending company is the service department. When a machine is broken, we need to get it working, not only for customer service, but also to reduce lost sales.

Nonetheless, most VMS packages do not offer any "service handheld" or other mobile platform for managing calls, despite its overall importance in running a profitable, sustainable business.

A few years back, Courtesy Vending decided to assign each one of our service technicians with a $199 Windows XP Netbook which connects wirelessly to broadband Internet throughout the city.

We originally planned to run our MEI Easitrax on it through our VPN, but that proved to be slow.

Then we came up with a solution that worked much better. We set up a protocol called "remote app" which allowed Easitrax to run on the local machine, but send only the Easitrax window to the remote computer in the field. It was much faster.

With the full version of Easitrax, technicians can view and log off service calls in real time (allowing everyone in the office to stay updated), view service call histories, view vend tickets, view machine information like serial and model numbers, view schedules, who the driver is, and more.

Not to mention with the Netbook they also have access to our Sharepoint site with all the machine manuals, the GPS site to see where other techs are in real-time, a map we generate daily that has all the service calls plotted on a Google Map, and the ability to renew CyberKeys in the field.

We have a digital video surveillance system in our facility. With GView, I can access the cameras with my iPhone and iPad and view them in real time.

With our system, I can even set certain cameras to run on motion-detect and notify me. If anyone enters the cashroom (which has limited access through the Cyber-Audit system) I can immediately get notified on my iPhone with an email stating someone entered and it attaches three pictures taken about a second apart so I can see who it is!

Our trucks are equipped with GPS North America service. While they don't have an iPad app, I can access the system through my iPad and view in real time where our service vehicles are located. The system can even send alerts when certain things happen — like if

anyone drives over 75 mph, or if any technician is stopped in any place for more than one hour, or if anyone enters the 7-11 just up the road from our warehouse.

With over 500,000 apps available, these are just a small sampling of how a vending operator can leverage the iPhone and iPad in their business. While I have nearly 100 apps on my iPhone, the apps I mentioned in this article are the ones I use in my business on a regular basis. I will describe other apps I use in an upcoming article. | ◀

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