

Remote Data Collection

Improving efficiencies & boosting customer service

by: Brent Hoskins, Office Technology Magazine

The day when the copier — now the MFP — only connected to an electrical outlet is becoming a fading memory. Today, the MFP also connects to the local area network and, if desired, to the outside world. In fact, increasingly, MFPs and printers are being accessed remotely to ensure an optimum level of performance and to provide data that can improve efficiencies and boost customer service.

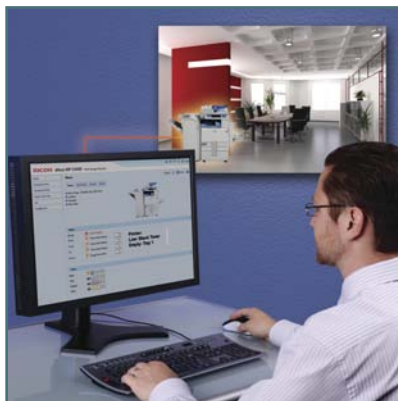
In recent years, dealers have seen the rise of software-based solutions designed to provide for the automatic, remote retrieval of meter reads. Increasingly, such solutions are also reacting to service alerts and monitoring toner levels. If you have not taken a look at such capabilities in the past, perhaps it is time to do so. Following is a brief look at four from the growing list of companies that are making notable advancements in this arena.

FMAudit

FMAudit (www.fmaudit.com) is one of several companies that emerged a few years back introducing quick print-volume assessments via a USB key. The key provides the sales rep the opportunity to collect data from the prospect that can be used to generate a print management proposal. The technology and its capability were met with great interest by dealers and hardware manufacturers alike.

Since those early years, FMAudit has made significant strides. While it still offers the USB key, it is now primarily focused on helping dealerships grow their print management business through remote data collection solutions and related process and workflow improvement.

“Three or four years ago, it was simply about doing a sales assessment and getting the business,” says Darrell Leven, vice president of sales and marketing for FMAudit. “Today, it



is still about getting the business, but more importantly, it is about managing the contract and maintaining that business profitably.”

FMAudit is helping dealers with their print management initiatives through the use of its two lead products — WebAudit and Onsite. WebAudit uses browser-based technology to provide sales assessments. It can also be used to automate monthly meter collection after the sale. The customer simply clicks on a Web link and WebAudit finds all of the

devices on the customer’s network and sends the data back to the dealer’s central data server. Onsite, on the other hand, is software that is installed on the customer’s network. It automatically sends encrypted meter, supply and service data to the dealership’s server at pre-determined intervals. “Today, our customers monitor some 2.2 million devices around the world,” says Leven. “And that number continues to grow dramatically each month.”

For the dealer, installing Onsite is more ideal than simply using WebAudit, says Leven. “Onsite gives the dealers a true presence in the account,” he says. “It provides an opportunity for the dealer to work closely with management and IT to optimize device placement and control costs.” In addition to supply and service data, Onsite also provides daily meter collection that syncs with the dealership’s ERP system, such as systems from Digital Gateway and ECi.

“Onsite also provides a ‘Trojan Horse’ in the customer location,” he says, since it allows dealerships to constantly monitor the account and block competition. “That way, the dealership can better manage the account in terms of meters, supplies and service on a 24/7 basis and discover new revenue opportunities.”

If the customer allows the dealership access to all IP

addresses on the network, with Onsite it can “look at everything that they’ve got, including keeping track of new implementations of competitive product,” says Leven, noting that, whether it is new or existing competitive equipment, Onsite can help dealers put together a strategy that could lead to the replacement of competitive equipment. “It also provides an opportunity for supply triggered marketing.”

Supply triggered marketing? Another capability of Onsite, this feature allows for the filtering of automatic supply alerts. The alert triggers a workflow process that, in turn, can trigger telemarketing, e-mail contact, text messaging or marketing communication to sell consumables for competitive, non-managed MFPs and printers. “For example, if the customer had a printer placed by a competitor, I could carry supplies for that printer on my e-commerce site and direct the customer to that site or just simply provide them an e-mail quote,” says Leven, adding that the e-mail could be set to send when the toner capacity reached a certain level, such as 20 percent or 5 percent. “So, there are a lot of opportunities you can ‘trigger’ from what the device is telling you.”

MWA Intelligence Inc.

MWA Intelligence Inc. (MWAi, www.mwaintelligence.com) is primarily focused on improving operational efficiencies in the office technology dealership’s service department. Through its M2M (machine-to-machine) technologies, it helps dealerships streamline a full range of manually intensive processes, assisting with service dispatch, parts/supplies replenishment and automating meter billing and service call creation.

Among MWAi’s solutions is Intelligent Assets, providing tools that will allow the dealership to extract data from a customer’s networked or locally connected MFPs and printers and deliver it to an ERP system (i.e., Digital Gateway, ECi). “This is a systematic, complete solution,” says Mike Stramaglio, president and CEO of MWAi. “So, it provides everything that a dealer needs for data collection and deposit — metering, service call creation or print assessment.”

Commenting on service call creation in particular, Stra-

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maglio explains that the system can be set up to react to automated service alerts in a pre-determined manner. For example, he says, if a fuser roller is out on an MFP, service dispatch will be alerted so that a tech can be deployed to make the repair. Of course, not every service alert will generate a service call, he adds. “Obviously, on a paper jam, a service call

would not be created,” he says. “However, that data will reside in the ERP system for historical analysis.”

Beyond its M2M technologies, MWAi offers M2P (machine-to-person) technology for the service department. Together, the company’s Intelligent Service Management and Intelligent Workforce tools work to improve customer satisfaction and maximize technician productivity. “We make sure that all of the remotely collected data from the machine is automatically integrated into the service application so that the service tech can see on his PDA a variety of menu items that make that machine perform well so that he ‘knows before he goes,’” he explains. “He can understand what parts he needs, how the engine normally runs — all the things that he needs to be prepared for a more effective and efficient call.”

While MWAi’s solutions are primarily focused on the service department, its technologies also assist the sales department. The company portfolio includes Intelligent Managed Print Services (IMPS), which provides a dealership’s sales team members with information that can help them develop data-driven sales proposals. Because the dealership is remotely monitoring device usage, it can determine usage patterns and identify MFPs and printers not managed by the dealership. “With such data, the sales rep can complete a quantitative proposal,” explains Stramaglio, noting that IMPS supports data export to proposal generation engines such as Compass and DocuAudit. “The rep can then say, ‘If we change things around here, you can save a tremendous amount of money and improve your productivity.’”

Ricoh Americas Corp.

In the fall of 2005, Ricoh Americas Corp. introduced @Remote, its intelligent remote management system. Through the use of embedded software (now included at no additional

charge in virtually every Ricoh MFP and printer) or a connected hardware appliance (for environments with large numbers of monitored printing devices), @Remote facilitates automated meter reads from the customer location, along with toner and service alerts and the ability to perform remote firmware upgrades. It also provides information on device population, utilization and monthly trending data, if desired.

“Every dealer is successful in their own marketplace because they have figured out how to differentiate their service offering to customers,” says John Carlomano, senior marketing manager at Ricoh. “What @Remote does is it enhances the level of service that they can provide their customers.”

That enhancement, says Carlomano, can help dealers win new customers. “Imagine a company with an MFP lease from another vendor that is about to end — a company that is considering bids from multiple dealers,” he explains. “If the dealership can offer the automation of the meter submission process as a benefit, it provides itself with a competitive advantage.”

As noted, that competitive advantage also includes the ability to provide toner and service alerts in real time, so that the dealer can quickly let the customer know about any problems while acting to resolve those problems. Carlomano cites the example of an MFP that is offline. “Say a customer comes to work at 8 a.m. on a Monday morning to prepare for an 11 a.m. meeting, cranking away to prepare a document to print,” he explains. “But then, 15 minutes before the meeting when he hits the print button, he discovers the MFP is offline.”

In the same scenario but with @Remote in use, the dealership could be alerted before the customer is even aware of the problem, says Carlomano. “The dispatcher could call the customer at 8:30 a.m. and say, ‘An error code indicates that your MFP is not operational. We know exactly what’s wrong. Someone will be there by 9:30 with the replacement part.’ This allows the dealership to be proactive in a scenario when a customer doesn’t know there is a scenario.”

Further explaining the difficulties of addressing a service problem where @Remote is not in use, Greg Wright, @Remote product marketing and senior program manager,

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says typically when there is a service problem, someone at the customer location calls the dealership to try and explain the problem. “You will play ‘20 questions’ with that person trying to identify the problem,” he explains. “With @Remote, the machine will notify the dealership with, ‘I’m definitely broken, here is my exact problem and here’s a list of

my last 10 problems,’ allowing you to see if there are any trends. So, as opposed to the information that you would receive from the customer, the information you would receive from the machine is much more actionable.”

Ricoh is continuing to make strides with @Remote. The company recently announced the addition of a “green-oriented” report that is based on the usage of any given device, for those companies that have an environmental policy. For example, the report shows how many pages (with the overall percentage that were duplexed) have been printed on monitored Ricoh devices within a given time period, says Wright. “We can also show the number of combined pages, where our machines have the functionality to print four pages on one sheet or six on one, etc.,” he explains. “We then take that information and reflect the savings in the number of sheets of paper. Then, sheets of paper equate to trees and trees equate to CO2 production.”

The Utility Company

The Utility Company (www.theutilitycompany.com) takes a broad approach to serving the office technology dealership. It is not only focused on connected MFPs and printers, but is also focused on the network itself. “Specifically,” says Jason Creally, vice president of sales for The Utility Company, “through our service automation program we remotely triage the majority of printer issues that are network-related.”

Recently, The Utility Company introduced Remote Printer Support (RPS), its latest remote technology service bundle. The service offers remote printer monitoring and a toll-free number to a live helpdesk at The Utility Company.

With both the monitoring and helpdesk at a remote location, Creally acknowledges that RPS does not provide service for mechanical issues. “However,” he contends, “if there are 15 reasons why a printer won’t print, 14 of them can be fixed

remotely. These are problems such as a print driver or a connectivity issue. We can solve 95 percent of such problems remotely. We've allowed our dealers to avoid two to three onsite calls per day for those non-mechanical issues, which results in thousands of dollars of savings per month to the dealer."

Creally cites a typical scenario where RPS is in use.

When an MFP or printer is not operating properly and a call between the user and the dealership determines that the problem is not mechanical, the user is directed to the dealership's partner, The Utility Company, rather than being advised to call any local (contracted or otherwise) third-party IT services company. "We will take remote control of the user's PC to diagnose and fix the printing problem," he says. "We allow

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As part of RPS, The Utility Company also offers an 24/7 remote monitoring service for printing devices. "It continually collects data on the device [toner levels, meter reads, error codes] so that

when there is a problem, it can be solved more quickly," says Creally. "Or, better yet, our remote monitoring can help prevent a printing problem." ■

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