

Imagination (and \$15 Million) at Work

GE Consumer Products' investment in mobile CRM produces bottom-line results—and happy customers.

By Eric M. Zeman

You would be hard pressed to find a home or business in America without a General Electric (GE) product hiding in it, whether it be a telephone, a washer, a dryer or a refrigerator. Manufacturing and mass-marketing white goods has been GE's mission for the past 125 years. During its long history, GE has proven itself a market leader in innovation, production and performance. So it should come as no surprise that GE feels the same way about the service it provides to its customers.

Corporate values firmly in hand, GE Consumer Products (GECF)—already an established leader in field service—knew it could improve the performance of its white goods repair service, which fixes appliances found in residences, apartment complexes, hotels, motels, retailers and builders across the U.S. Encompassing some 1,500 technicians who cover 118 zones in six regions, GECF used six call centers to take service calls and dispatch technicians to repair locations. Run



There are 1,500 technicians covering the U.S. in GE's service division.

by an aging legacy system, GECF knew it was time to step into the 21st century if it wanted to achieve the lofty improvement goals set by management.

Although GECF originally thought it might be able to use a solution off the shelf, it eventually turned to Annapolis, Md.-based ServicePower, a global developer and supplier of workforce optimization software for the customer relationship management (CRM) market.

"We selected ServicePower because of its proven ability to deliver real benefits to our service operation," comments Darryl Miller, general manager of factory service at GECF. "We were already very efficient but recognized that to break through the productivity glass ceiling required a

new generation of technology, which supports our commitment to remain the best in the business."

After spending six months investigating its hardware options, which originally included PDAs, GECF decided to deploy a laptop-based solution for its 1,500 technicians. Choosing Pentium III-armed Panasonic ToughBooks (complete with infrared printers) that allow techs to look at repair manuals, diagrams and 3-D views of parts, GECF wirelessly enabled them all for real-time syncing and updating. The wireless connectivity means techs don't have to spend time uploading and downloading work orders and parts requests at the beginning and end

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FYI

Company: General Electric Consumer Products

Project: Deploy wireless laptop solution to 1,500 service technicians.

Vendors: ServicePower, Panasonic

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of each day. The next day's jobs are batched, transmitted and loaded into the tech's laptops wirelessly overnight. They simply get up in the morning, grab their laptops and go.

Training the technicians to use the solution "was the easiest part," says Miller. It took about a year to roll out the solution and train all the field techs, which was done via CD-ROMs that taught them how to use the new software. "The technicians are very happy with the laptops," says Miller. "They've made the technicians' job much easier."

Using the ServicePower software, the laptop solution enables field management to plan territory coverage while providing intelligent

appointment booking and continually optimizing the service schedule. The managers have available to them a live display of the schedule, where they can view the status and type of all jobs assigned to technicians, view the travel time between jobs and manually override assignments if there are conflicts.

Once the solution was fully deployed, the benefits for GECP were obvious almost immediately. Technician productivity improved from between 7.5 and 7.6 customers serviced per day to between 8.0 and 8.1. The new processes also helped improve first-time repair rates to between 87 and 90 percent—well above the industry standard—meaning far fewer trips to see the same customer when parts were not available or other complications arose. Dispatch centers were reduced from 40 to 3, allowing GECP to reduce dispatcher headcount. Field managers were also given access to a real-time view of the service operation. This, in turn,



GE service technicians run ServicePower software on wireless, rugged notebooks.

leads to improved service consistency across the country.

Of course, GECP isn't the only beneficiary of this laptop solution. Some customers are beaming, too. The new system allows customers more flexibility when choosing appointment windows; sometimes GECP can get out to see them the same day they call for service. "Consumers are the real winner here," notes Miller. "Getting to more people every day means more people are happy." The solution has also boosted on-time service by 2 percent.

All this automation would never have been possible without a considerable investment on GECP's part. By Miller's estimates "all the software, hardware and labor amounted to about \$15 million." As they say, automation doesn't come cheaply, and even for a company with cash reserves of \$15 billion and 2002 revenues of \$132 billion, it's hardly pocket change. GECP planned for an ROI within

three years but recouped their cash outlays in just one year.

Since the enterprise roll-out to the 1,500 techs was completed, GECP and ServicePower signed an agreement whereby they will team up to support the development and use of a contractor scheduling system built around a core of ServicePower's technology. The software will help GECP service workers continue to deliver world-class service. In recognition of this support, the directors of ServicePower announced that they have granted GECP a warrant over 5 percent of ServicePower's shares so that GECP will share in the success of the company.

Though it was already the industry leader, GECP's commitment to providing the best products and services is evident in the deployment of this wireless laptop solution. Not only does GE bring good things to life, it also keeps them alive to the best of its ability. 