

MANAGEMENT INFORMATION

Whatever your business, management information is vital to prosperity; Paul Clapman takes a look at what PCI Systems has to offer.

ARE YOU running your business, or is your business running you? And, since you are in the marketing end of the clothing trade, is it running you ragged? The promise of taking control has been a fundamental proposition of all business computers and attaching software since Bill Gates decided to take an extended sabbatical from Harvard.

But the promise has not always been delivered. In particular, the software has not quite lived up to expectations. Because it's designed and written to be applicable to all businesses, it ends up being not quite right for the needs of individual business sectors. Faced with this, some companies have gone down the route of having their own dedicated software written – and in the process have discovered why others don't; it's eye-popping expensive!

What you want is a combination of the two benefits – standardised, so low cost, but dedicated to your business. Happily this is not a cross between a Volkswagen and a Ferrari; it exists for the clothing trade and it works. Sheffield based PCI Systems have created over their 25 year history a range of products dedicated to fulfilling the management needs of the clothing industry – sales, order processing and stock control.

Set up in 1981, PCI have 12 employees and turnover has reached £1 million. Whereas in their early years the company supplied both software and hardware, as the market changed they now focus on software. The company has three main products. Their flagship is Prof.IT which is a development of two existing products, Tec.Style and Stock.IT, both of which are still operational.

PCI's origins are firmly centred in the clothing industry and their location in Sheffield is at the heart of the Manchester, Leeds and Nottingham clothing triangle. It's also ideal for the second string to their bow which is software for the steel industry. That might seem an odd association with the rag trade, but in fact they are structurally similar. Steel stockholders sell products in a wide variety of shapes, weights and sizes – but it's all steel; likewise tee-shirts come in myriad colours, sizes and fits – but it's all cotton.

Herein lies the key proposition of PCI – the software is multi-dimensional; Prof.IT is ready set up to handle all those variations. Standard products simply can't match that level of flexibility. Trying to apply such a system to clothing's complexity ends up with a lot of manual adjustments, which is time-consuming and error-ridden.

Prof.IT is a user friendly product. Now, everyone makes that claim, but PCI can back it up. It was designed by people with a background in the clothing

industry. MD, Bob Dawson, was himself previously a production engineer and manager in a clothing business. That, I suggest, is a critical qualification, unless you have “been there, done that” how can you know what the problems are, or where the opportunities lie? In practical terms, users don’t have to be “techies”. The system presents information in a variety of accessible ways. As Mr Dawson comments “Everyone can understand graphs and pie charts”.

We all know the old saw that knowledge is power. We also know the phrase information overload. Too much can be as bad as not enough. The PCI philosophy is this “we help people translate the information into profitable action”. So what does that mean? Dust on products in the warehouse tells you that a style or size or colour is a problem child, but it’s telling you all too late. Prof.IT can ring those alarm bells early so that you can do something practical – price cuts, volume promotions, increased sampling. The converse applies too. You’ll have the earliest advice that product or colour’s sales are accelerating, which is an excellent sales prompt to all customers and keeps you ahead of the competition.

Bob Dawson says that the system is entirely appropriate to businesses of all types within the sector, as demonstrated by their customer base, which covers businesses of all sizes from large schoolwear suppliers such as Rowlinson, to small garment decorators. Thus there is no typical customer for Prof.IT – they have clients with two or three users on one hand and on the other, those who have thirty to forty users.

What such users say is instructive. Here’s Donald Moore, Managing Director at Rowlinson Knitwear: “We place a great deal of importance on the level of support services we can supply to our customers. Growth in our business over the last few years meant we needed a computer system that would enable us to provide our customers with up to the minute information on the status of their orders and the PCI System has enabled us to do this. The results of our latest customer satisfaction survey show that 93% of customers rated us as good/excellent.” Then there’s Steve Gustard MD of Moette: “The Prof.IT System has revolutionised the way we operate. It has helped us to integrate all the various functions of our business, and keeps everyone fully informed with up to the minute information on the states of sales, meaning we can offer a much better service to our customers”. Now these are pretty convincing testimonials from people who know their business.

Whilst PCI stress user-friendliness, the product has to be used properly to get best results; as Bob Dawson says “It’s very easy to teach people how to press buttons but it’s not so easy to teach them how to use the information they get”. It’s important therefore for businesses to have a clear plan of what they aim to get out of software.

Part of achieving best results from a supplier comes from continuity. That’s especially true of the IT world where businesses come and go, amalgamate and change their commercial focus with alarming regularity. PCI by contract have successfully kept key staff over long periods; you’re not suddenly talking

to a different contact twice a year. Indeed, some of PCI's clients have come to them – and stayed – when a previous IT supplier went bust. The continuity of relationship isn't just a comfort factor; it's valuable because a supplier who knows your business over years can recommend new ideas and ways to do business, purely because of that knowledge.

Even their recent addition to the board, Philip Brown, has some twenty years association with the business having bought the products as a client business in the 1980s, then recommended it as a consultant and now is training new users with his PCI hat on full time.

The company's expectations of future business opportunities are wide ranging. They see major potential in internet trading business. Since internet businesses are by definition technology based and typically have a high level of technological competence, they will expect an order fulfillment system which works properly in their environment and Prof.IT caters fully for them. This opens up worldwide markets, not only for their clients but for PCI themselves.

P&P readers will quickly recognise that this enables them to expand their total business reach without many of the costs normally attached to expansion. The same applies to introducing a mail order structure and again Prof.IT has a proven track record in that sales channel.

By contrast, they also find that many smaller businesses in the clothing sector lack in-house IT knowledge and skills. Those businesses know that they need to raise their IT game but don't know how – if their experience mirrors mine they will also find most generalist IT consultants impossible to understand without a degree in computer science. This is creating business opportunities for PCI because they can act as a 'one-stop IT shop', providing hardware, software, internet connection, website, e-mail and remote access. Bob Dawson says that they provide what people need (and their experience ensures that they do know what that is), removing the aggravation and wasted management time. Needless to say, in the process, they talk the language of the clothing industry not IT-speak.

www.pcisystems.co.uk