

Wireless POS Is Not A Fad

As end users come to terms with platform, interface, and security options, wireless POS (point of sale) grows legs.

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Wireless POS (point of sale) is one of those areas in the retail space that VARs and vendors have either jumped headlong into or watched from a safe distance and with cautious eyes. Which is the better approach? It remains to be seen whether the skeptics and vendors with a "you go first" attitude will suffer or benefit from their caution. But those who have jumped into the wireless POS pool are finally beginning to see some payoff, even as much of the market still wrestles with the cost, networking, and security challenges the technology presents.

The vendor/VAR effort to roll out wireless handheld units for conducting transactions began in fits and starts. Every time an end user turns around at a trade show these days, he's faced with a different form factor running a different software program on a different platform. It's therefore no surprise that wireless didn't take off like a rocket - the market has had lots to learn. But, now there are finally retailers who are growing more comfortable with the technology and more savvy with the interface options. Those are the retailers VARs and vendors need to find to test the wireless POS water.

Lean And Mean Leads To Green

What are retailers who are ready to adopt looking for in a wireless handheld? According to Joe Brisevac, owner of Volante Systems (Toronto), they're looking for thin client architecture. "You have to go thin from an operations standpoint and from a cost standpoint," he says. Operationally, he says a thin client uses less battery life, allowing units to get 8 to 10 hours out of a single charge. He also cites the simplicity of the thin client's interface as a benefit to the clerk. "The menus on the handheld are the exact same menus on the traditional register. The databases are in sync with one another. But you don't have to program your handheld, it's just an extension of the host computer, and because it's written in pure JAVA, it's real time," Brisevac explains. This approach is less expensive, he contends, because it doesn't require separate servers for handhelds and traditional registers.

Retailers Need Transaction Speed

One of the fundamental advantages of adopting wireless handhelds to conduct POS transactions is speed. But are handheld devices fast and powerful enough to expedite the transaction? "That's another reason we believe thin client is the way to go," says Brisevac. "We really don't think there's a handheld on the market today that's capable of supporting a POS program and performing as well as a traditional register." Problems that can arise when retailers attempt to run full-featured POS programs on handhelds include a decrease in battery life and a bogged-down application. "Perhaps the units will be better suited to handle the rigors of retail in the next couple of years, but in the meantime clerks are lucky to get four hours out of a unit, and they stand around waiting after they hit a keystroke," he says.

Every User Interface Has A Place

Ultimately, a handheld's user interface will dictate its acceptance. If it doesn't make the job of a clerk or waiter easier, it has no future. When it comes to making a full-service restaurant waiter's job easier, Alex Malison, president of Action Systems, Inc. (ASI) (Silver Spring, MD), is convinced his user interface is just the ticket. ASI's approach might be labeled both a small step and a giant leap away from the server's pencil and pad. "In 20 years, developers of handheld restaurant POS solutions haven't been able to develop a viable alternative to the pencil and pad," says Malison. He believes that's all changed now with the introduction of handwriting recognition technology in

his company's ASI Handheld solution. "The touch-button design of today's handheld restaurant POS devices was devised to speed communication with the kitchen, but it does nothing for communication with customers." To address this problem, ASI has developed a handheld that mimics the pencil and pad as closely as possible, using handwriting recognition technology as the primary input method. The system "reads" the waiter's writing, rather than requiring the waiter to search through menus for the appropriate item's touch button. This allows the waiter more time to interface with the customer and requires less waiter/handheld interface. ASI claims to have achieved a 95% accuracy rate on its character recognition.

Wireless Security Can Be Your "Killer App"

No vendor can address wireless networks without addressing security, but the necessity of bringing it up is more a product of fear than of the actual threat. The positive side of the wireless security scare is that it has bolstered vendors' attention to building security features into their wireless infrastructure. "There was a time when VARs had to go out and find their own answers and solutions for wireless network security," says Jeff Pinch of System 3 POS (Windsor, Ontario). "Today, companies like Apriva and Mineras take care of all the encryption on their own - it's standardized and built-in." Pinch also contends that as end users become more knowledgeable about wireless networks, they're demanding better security options. "Take casinos, for instance. You can't go in and tell them you've got a secure 128-bit encrypted wireless network. They're educated. They're going to say, 'No, I need 256 or 512, and I would prefer it on a VPN [virtual private network].' Today's end user is becoming more savvy."

Pinch contends a VAR's best practice is to play it safe and build as much security into its solutions as is practical. He says if it's secure, wireless POS can be a VAR's margin-winning "killer app," if you will. "At one time, everything VARs did was specialized and foreign to end users. Now, more and more of them know what we know about PCs and servers and touch screens." Wireless, he says, is just the specialization VARs need to bring back the magic. "The more specialized you are, the easier it is to demand margins on your services. This is important, considering that hardware margins have been stripped down and taken away from VARs," he says.

What's Your Next Move?

We're past the point of denying the reality of wireless at the POS. It's happening. The good news for those who haven't developed a solution that puts them on the bandwagon is that a mule, not a stallion, is pulling the bandwagon. That's bad news for VARs who have poured too many resources into promoting wireless solutions right now. Wireless POS is not a fad and should not be treated as such.

