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Unlocking The Potential Of Bar Code Printers

Bar code printer experts explain where higher margins are and what tools VARs need to have to get them.

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If you want to sell only thermal bar code printers, or any hardware for that matter, you won't be in business very long. As a reader of Business Solutions magazine and an active VAR, you already know that. What you might be struggling with is determining which value adds you can provide to differentiate your offering and land bar code printer business. Luckily, a couple of experts in the bar code printing industry are willing to share what you can do and where to focus your energies to boost your sales of thermal bar code printers.

Replace Laser Printers With Thermal

Both experts agree that the time has come to think of thermal printers as more than just bar code printers. Once VARs start looking at the capabilities of the printers and the benefits that result, new applications and opportunities can be found. For instance, laser printers traditionally are a favorite office environment printer — fast, cheaper than inkjets, and offering faster print speeds. They worked fine printing reports, documents, and an occasional label; however, they weren't designed for printing large quantities of labels, exactly what many people are having them do. **Raul Palacios, director of business development at Cognitive Solutions, Inc., explains that it costs more to maintain laser printers compared to thermal printers due to the number of moving parts and the costs of toner. In addition, thermal printers can print faster and have lower energy consumption. Overall, thermal printers have a lower total cost of ownership compared to laser printers.**

One market where lasers are being misused for label printing is in pharmacies, where labels are placed on prescription bottles and bags. David Lundeen, VP of marketing at TSC America, thinks VARs can easily pitch thermal printer sales to pharmacies based on a rough estimate of saving 25 cents on every printer transaction. The biggest objection he's heard concerns the handling of end-of-day reports. "I don't suggest you try to get customers to remove all of their laser printers," says Lundeen. "However, you can easily cut down to one laser printer for end-of-day reports as opposed to two or three. Since LANs are so common, it's easy enough to move reports around if needed or just reformat reports to a 4-inch wide format for the thermal printer."

Leverage The Stand-Alone Capabilities Of Thermal Printers

Both experts also agree that if there's one trend in terms of unique usage of thermal printers, it's in using them as stand-alone devices. Many of today's printers feature what essentially is a BASIC programming language interpreter integrated into the printer's firmware. Previous generations of printers would have to rely on a PC attached to the printer for the computation of data and formatting of a label. Today, you can store databases inside printers, add user prompts to printer displays, and attach input devices (e.g. bar code scanners and keyboards) directly to printers. "We've seen a great desire to eliminate PCs from applications," says Palacios. "Aside from the overall cost of the PC, you don't have to maintain operating systems, keep up with spam and viruses, and upgrade hardware." Lundeen agrees. "The onboard interpreter can be used to receive data and perform all sorts of manipulations, including mathematical, parsing, and concatenating," says Lundeen. "We're seeing great growth in these types of applications. If you take the time and learn how to program the printer and how to take advantage of all the capabilities inside the printer firmware

these days, there are lucrative opportunities for high-margin sales.”

Lundeen goes on to explain that the reason stand-alone printing is possible is the amount of extra processing power that today’s printers have. Manufacturers have figured out ways (such as adding BASIC interpreters) to make use of this extra processing power. The trick is for VARs to figure out how to leverage that extra power. While programming interpreters vary across all manufacturers, each essentially is a version of the BASIC programming language. Both experts agree that VARs should contact vendor partners and seek guidance on learning the finer points of creating stand-alone applications for thermal printers. **“That’s where the hidden knowledge is,” says Palacios. “Creating programs for a stand-alone thermal printer isn’t trivial, but once you learn, it’s an easy thing to do and something that truly will make you stand apart from the competition.”**

Healthcare Needs Thermal Printers

Lundeen and Palacios feel the greatest opportunity for thermal printer sales is in the healthcare vertical. Regulations and the possibility of damaging lawsuits have put hospitals on the search for methods of improving the quality, accuracy, and tracking of patient care. VARs can step in and combine the low total cost of ownership of thermal printers with stand-alone capabilities and offer custom solutions to aid in this pursuit. “It can begin with the patient wristband having a bar code,” says Palacios. “That bar code can be used as a tracking and reference number for everything from lab work, IV administration, and bedside specimen collection. There are infinite numbers of ways bar codes can be used. If VARs in our industry don’t know about these capabilities, the hospitals surely don’t.” For that reason, VARs should work closely with hospitals to learn their pain points. “The more a hospital can protect itself by having a good data stream of what happens to a patient, the better off it’s going to be,” Lundeen adds. “RFID [radio frequency identification] might be the future of traceability, but today the most cost-effective method in healthcare is with a bar code.”

Regardless of where you market your solutions, Lundeen advises VARs to pick a niche to excel at. “I’d focus on a solution that includes some custom software or programming,” he concludes. “I’d also pick vendors who would thoroughly train me on the products. The key is to offer a customized unique solution that can’t be shopped on the Internet.”

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