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My Three Companies

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While meeting the needs of its customers and the projects it services across the country, Menemsha Cos. has discovered that it takes hard work and a flexible tool that is pliable enough for each and every situation.

The only way to build is from the ground up. For large construction development firms, this principle applies in more ways than one. At Menemsha Cos., www.menemshacos.com, El Segundo, Calif., a general contractor and consultant specializing in “fast track” retail, restaurant, medical, and specialized office construction, this concept fit particularly well when it came to coordinating the communication and accountability of its multiple people, companies, and projects.

Since its incorporation in 1992, Menemsha Cos. has successfully completed more than 4,000 projects of varying size and scope, netting some \$72 million in revenue in 2004.

The firm is made up of three companies that provide varying construction services. Brand Builders focuses on remodeling and fixture installation. This can include multiple locations requiring intensive planning and coordination and field based quality control managers to ensure consistency. Construction teams work at night allowing the business to operate during business hours with less interruption.

TI Planning, pre-construction and construction management, helps develop budgets, coordinates leases and real estate, performs computer-aided design and drafting site surveys, and helps expedite permits.

Its general contracting company, CMG, has experience with aggressive market expansion. It offers a 24/7 warranty and maintenance center, preliminary design project budgeting, national brand rollout project management, and pre-construction planning and scheduling. It has a national subcontractor database and all of its services are offered nationwide.

Among the clients served by the group include Pottery Barn, www.potterybarn.com, San Francisco, Calif.; Starbucks Corp., www.starbucks.com, Seattle, Wash.; Boston Market, www.bostonmarket.com, Golden, Colo.; and Cingular Wireless LCC, www.cingular.com, Atlanta, Ga.

Menemsha had technology in place to help manage business with its established clientele. However, a fellow contractor suggested an application he discovered for stronger support and enhanced collaboration for projects, especially ones involving multiple contractors.

Uncovering the Key

A fellow contractor’s recommendation led Menemsha to USGN, www.usglobal.net, Phoenix, Ariz., and its online customer-driven collaborative project management platform, USGlobalNet, designed to assist companies in controlling processes and growing them into best practices.

The platform software is written with an open-source programming language, which allows users to view and modify coding as needed. It also contains a MySQL database from MySQL Inc., www.mysql.com, Seattle, Wash., which is open source as well, containing database tables that are created based on applications built by the user. The platform ties into the databases and the customer can manipulate the data as needed.

Doug Sperr, founder and CEO, USGN, compares the platform to “a blank sheet of paper—the customers can start writing anything they want on it. So, what they build with it is really up to them, and it models their own company best practices.” The simplicity of the system reduces the need for strong support from the information technology (IT) department during implementation.

“What our customers are building as applications on top of our development platform is really where the magic is, because

we've given these people a tool that they've never had before: a Web platform that they (can use to) create database applications and automations around their existing processes," explains Sperr.

Martha Bayer, chief operating officer, Menemsha, agrees. She says the system is easy to use. "It's very intuitive. It has all the common (construction) nomenclature," she says, stressing the value of a customizable platform.

With either established processes or new ideas, companies can build applications they need on top of the development platform. Possibilities include drawing management, online bidding, supply-chain management, report building, online plan rooms, and online printing of documents. The platform also interfaces with such tools as Microsoft Project from Microsoft Corp., www.microsoft.com, Redmond, Wash., and Crystal Reports from Business Objects, www.businessobjects.com, San Jose, Calif.

Through such a broad range of flexible uses, Sperr says the Web-based platform is only limited by the imagination of the user. He adds, "We think companies want to streamline their existing processes and to have a system that can adapt to their improvements; something that lets them keep the wheel they just invented, something that will always grow with them."

In late 2001, Menemsha signed up and leveraged the platform for its first program with The Home Depot Inc., www.homedepot.com, Atlanta, Ga. It was used for such things as housing pictures and work order forms. After this first taste of the customizable platform, Menemsha invested more in the technology.

Speaking to the many applications Menemsha now operates on the platform, Bayer says, "Today we customize forms to each client's individual program needs to gather data, create reports, drive meeting agendas, obtain cost approvals, etc. Our ideas are endless and this tool allows for creative, quick implementation of those ideas."

The system and the applications Menemsha has built on top of the platform have allowed it to grow from running 60-65 remodels a week to 90-95 remodels a week. But above what it can do for itself, Menemsha believes some of the biggest benefits are based on what it can do for its customers.

"When we come to our clients and offer consultative construction services, what we aren't saying is, just tell me what you want to do, when you want to do it, where you want to do it. We challenge our clients to allow us to understand their process, ask a lot of questions about their process, and help them improve it so they can get more product to market quicker," says Bayer.

Put into Play

A platform that can go in practically any direction is a good fit for Menemsha with its diverse project and client list.

When working one-on-one with a company such as The Home Depot, the system is set up strictly for Menemsha and The Home Depot. For example, vendors of The Home Depot understand they are to use the system to record when deliveries are made. However, the true pay dirt for Menemsha comes from larger, more complex projects, with multiple locations and general contractors.

Menemsha was hired by retailer Victoria's Secret, www.victoriassecret.com, Columbus, Ohio, as one of eight general contractors for its Pink brand rollout in 2004. It was also selected to coordinate the project through its Web-based program management. The companies took a little more than a month to build the Web forms and reports used throughout the program. Construction to the approximately 600 stores took place during the summer and the entire project was completed in early September 2004.

"With Victoria's Secret's Pink rollout, they were doing everything manually with faxes and paper. Looking at everything that did and didn't happen, (Menemsha) was able to tailor the software to gather the data and allowed them to reduce the number of outside consultants they were leveraging to manage the remodel program from six or eight to two or three people," says Bayer.

The project was extremely complicated. One phase of the project included 194 stores slated for completion in three weeks; each store remodel was expected to last five days with construction taking place at night. Deliveries, instructions, and communication all had to be topnotch in order for it to be a success. Part of what Menemsha set up was a few basic forms to be answered by the site supervisor each morning following the previous night's construction.

First was the daily log with three questions: Is the project on schedule? Are there any landlord issues? Are there any issues with security? The log had an area to describe each issue as well as select boxes with status reports with pending, yes, and no options. Pending was the default answer. The user clicks submit and the system automatically goes to the milestone update,

also a daily requirement.

This document houses specific questions about events that should have occurred on a particular day. It helps Menemsha and Victoria's Secret keep track of basic information needed to keep a project on task, such as if deliveries were made or need to be reordered. These forms and the request for information (RFI) follow a basic template Menemsha created, but are customized for each project and client.

Menemsha aims for ease of use because it knows the computer skills of field workers and other users tend to vary, hence many select boxes and yes/no questions.

Each morning reports had been run based on the answers that were posted on the forms for the management conference call. USGN's platform generates all of the information gathered and has an option to transfer it to an Excel spreadsheet. Menemsha created a template spreadsheet for the reports with sortable data, complete with the Victoria's Secret Pink logo. Questions answered negatively (e.g. no, the project is not on schedule, or yes, there are security issues) appear in highlighted yellow boxes. Management can focus then on the problems and sort the information by general contractor.

Such detailed reporting spurs accountability among the project team. No contractor wants to be the slowest or the one with the most problems, which can be quickly determined on the application. In addition, Menemsha has established statistics within its reports. For example, on RFIs it shows which area of the project has the most questions, allowing for addendums to be made to instructions.

Bayer says, "From our standpoint the impact that Menemsha has been able to make leveraging (this unique) tool is significant increases in productivity and significant decreases in cost. We don't have a traditional construction person's approach to construction services. We have a business consultant's, that is business process coming hand-in-hand with the construction expert to help improve what our clients can achieve for their development process."