



Developing success through partnerships

Agnes H. Baker interviews David Schaer, President of Computers Unlimited

Congratulations on your 40 years of success as a family-owned and managed business and thank you for inviting **gasworld** US to your 34th annual User's Group Conference.

I certainly have learned a great deal about what Computers Unlimited has to offer the industrial gases and welding hardgoods industry.

I am struck by two things in particular – the method in which you develop software

and the number of new applications you introduce each year.

Let's start with your approach to development. It seems unique in the world of software.

David Schaer: Yes, we do have our own approach to development. We began as a company which developed custom software – one client at a time. We learned how to re-apply those products to general

business practices for a wider group. Today we work with a steering committee, whose role is to help direct the software. This group is a cross section of customers, many of whom have been using our core product, TIMS (Total Information Management System), for many years. They tend to be progressive thinkers when it comes to IT.

gasworld: I am impressed by the amount of collaboration I see at this conference. You seem to know all of your customers by name.

DS: There is definitely a two-way conversation between our customers and our developers. We don't tell our customers what they need to do, they tell us.

Some would say we work “backwards.” We begin with what the user experience is going to look like in the end. We walk through the entire process, mock it up, simulate it, and then code to that plan.

gasworld: CU has continually taken on new projects that keep its products in line with the fast moving high-tech world. How do you accomplish this?

DS: We are fortunate to have a very deep knowledge base here and are aware of the latest tools and protocols.

This enables us to create new products, even if we have no prior experience in that particular application.

We also are mindful of developing platforms that can be extended laterally so that they can be applied to other things.

For example, one of our customers bought a propane company and wanted us to integrate propane management into their TIMS platform.

This was something new. As we developed the program for propane, we were cognizant of the fact that two or three years down the road, we should be able to apply this to other gases. And we did. This product became our new Bulk Gas Manager application that we introduced at this year's Users Group Conference.

Our philosophy has always been to unify and integrate, which is why our core product is named Total Information Management System.

gasworld: You talk a lot about system integration. This seems to be what's behind many of the new products introduced this year.

DS: As the market grows, people need more control. For example, you can't just guess what's out there in your bulk tanks or cylinders anymore. Delivery costs are huge and price competition is fierce. Distributors need to be able to tie all the pieces and processes together in one system that they can access. Integration enables this.

Mobility is also a driving force behind the need to integrate and connect your data to a variety of devices. Smart phone technology has opened up a whole new world of possibilities and we plan to take advantage of that.

Interfaces that connect your ERP to other software programs are important to the integration process. For example, the ability of our customers to link to Roadnet, Omnitrac's sophisticated software solution for routing, through the TIMS platform makes our Delivery application stronger. Business processes are sped up with this kind of interface.

That's why we talk about our new effort to develop standardized APIs (Application Performing Interfaces). We are creating standards for people to interface with TIMS so our customers can connect with other software. We're building the tools to connect TIMS to the rest of the world.

APIs are also opening up the world of Business Intelligence (BI). Another new initiative we are introducing this year is connecting our users to Microsoft's Power BI application. This is a Cloud-based analytical tool that provides a secure way for a TIMS user to connect his data to a suite of interactive, real-time dashboards. It's a whole new way to get complex and important analytics for your business.

gasworld: Yes, I heard a lot of interest in BI. Distributors also seem excited about your new Cylinder Replenishment and Plant Production application.

DS: This is a great addition to our suite of products. Known as CIFR, this program uses all the information available with our Cylinder Control and Advanced Cylinder

Management (ACM) modules and takes it to the next step. While ACM gives you control over where your cylinders are, what's in them, and their location, it doesn't show you what the true demand and stocking levels are for a customer, branch, or organization. CIFR does that. It tells you how much and what to produce and can eliminate stock outs at each location. We've had an automated purchasing model for hard goods: now we have one for cylinder filling and replenishment.

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gasworld: There was also great enthusiasm for your new Campaign Manager.

DS: Everyone needs better tools to manage their contracts. To date, distributors have had to rely on spreadsheets for pricing information, and frankly, a lot of guessing as it is often difficult to parse out the financial impact of price changes. With distributors having thousands of contracts, it is also a time consuming task to manage new price campaigns. Campaign Manager automates the entire process and enables users to forecast the financial impact of their pricing decisions. I believe it is going to be the biggest productivity tool to manage contracts that we have ever seen.

gasworld: At the conference you also talked about using Artificial Intelligence (AI) to develop your products. How does that work?

DS: This relates back to integration, which enables systems to “learn” from business transactions. Truck deliveries are a great example of how AI can be applied to make your business more efficient. We can track customer buying patterns and how long deliveries take. That information can be used for predictive analytics, like where should you deliver tomorrow and how

long those deliveries will take. With data based on actual transactions and activities, patterns emerge and can be used to create greater efficiencies in your processes.

We're using AI to some extent now with auto confirmation for orders. Using TIMS Delivery and ACM, users can turn on auto selection and apply business rules to determine if an order is error free. If clean, that order is automatically invoiced. Whatever labor costs are associated with the order confirmation business processes are immediately reduced by 90%.

gasworld: AI is another example of CU's forward looking approach to development. Forty years is a long time to be in the software business. To what do you attribute your success?

DS: The human element is important in any organization and we are fortunate to have a great group of people from a variety of backgrounds supporting CU. Working here is not defined so much as a job, but more as being part of a team and in partnership with our customers.

As a family-run business we determine our own culture and have created a very unique position for ourselves here in Montana. Unlike our corporate colleagues, we can focus on solving problems for our customers and be mindful about how we go about doing that. We recognize that we are not developing programs for large R&D outfits that never see the light of day, but for people trying to run a complex business more efficiently. As such, CU is very cautious about jumping on board with new technology that is yet unproven.

As a company, we firmly believe that our success, growth, and profitability are directly tied to the success of our customers, and we are not for sale. We attribute our success to the people who have helped us build this business, to our customers who have collaborated with us on product development, and to the support of the community in which we are located. My father began this effort 40 years ago and he and our family are grateful to all of those who helped us create Computers Unlimited. As a close-knit team, we look forward to working with our customers in the years ahead. 