PARTNER SUCCESS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This study is an example of how Ai2's solutions are used in the distribution marketplace to solve technology problems and help distributors grow their business. Through the use of Ai2's software suite, one particular organization freed themselves from the limitations of older technology and positioned themselves to capture more business.

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"Our competitors either offered smart order entry already or they were considering it."

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Convenience and grocery distributor **Charles C. Parks Co.** operates from Gallatin, Tennessee to a broad customer base of chain and independent retailers. They were enjoying a solid market share a few years ago, but there was **a large gap in communication with their customers**. Outdated technology was to blame, and it was consuming valuable internal resources. In an age where customers are more demanding than ever and distributors face their strongest competition yet, every customer and every order counts.

Telxon units with acoustic couplers were a staple of the convenience industry in the late 1980s through the early 2000s. Parks' mobile sales force and customers depended on the data collection terminals to transmit 100 or more lines of text at a time, an order consisting of six-digit item numbers and the quantities being ordered.

Before Ai2, "we had MSIs or Telxons in all our salespeople's hands and all our customer locations, scanning barcodes and keying in item numbers, then sending orders through 800 numbers into a server," relates David Lowery, director of information technology for Charles C. Parks. "The hardware lasted longer than we thought it would, but **the phone lines didn't keep up**. Pretty soon, we were having **a lot of transmission errors that frustrated our staff and our customers**." In the worst cases, the device would not send the order and a customer had to call in an order line-by-line, reading item numbers and quantities to a customer service representative. This can take twenty or thirty minutes per order.

While the IT and customer service staff were struggling with the technology, competitive pressures intensified at the corporate level. Charles Parks is not the largest convenience distributor in Tennessee, and far from the only one. When other companies offer "smart" order entry and modern technology platforms to lure new customers, it is **impossible to compete** when you're using technology from the 1980s.

"Either [competitors] offered smart order entry already or they were considering it," Lowery related. These types of issues cut into Parks' profitability, especially when competing for chains of many stores. These inefficiencies and the competitive pressures led the company to seek change. Parks' IT staff saw an Ai2 presentation at a technology partnership show, then followed up with **personal software demonstrations** via webinar. Parks had tried another provider in the past with mixed results, so they were still looking for a solution. It became clear that Ai2 had experience in solving the two main issues Parks was having. "They had **the features we needed** and they were **on the street**," recalls Lowery. Ai2 also had the industry knowledge and IT expertise to give Parks a platform for future growth.
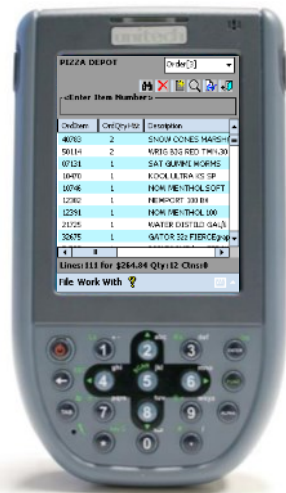
RAISING THE COMPANY'S PROFILE

Charles Parks' executive team can now offer the latest technology when pitching their business to a prospective store or chain. Now the company can focus on their personalized service and other advantages. There's no risk of losing because a competitor offers superior technology. Parks chose hardware that can be labeled with their logo, reinforcing their brand in the marketplace. The company has successfully charged a small fee for use of the solution, since it provides so much value to each customer.

Solving Communication Issues – Ai2's Handheld Entry for Remote Orders (HERO) solution runs in the Windows Mobile environment on a variety of handheld PCs. These PCs are designed for **constant daily use outside the four walls**, with built-in scanners to capture bar code data and a ruggedized form factor that protects them if they're dropped. The units communicate with distributors' host computer systems in a variety of ways, from an existing Internet connection to dial-up modem by plugging into the phone jack on the wall. Moving away from acoustic couplers means that Parks receives the exact order the salesperson or customer transmits.

Cutting Costs – Since Parks' mobile sales force implemented the POW solution from Ai2, they've gone from "paper to no paper" according to Lowery. Fewer accounts receivable registers, promotional flyers and paper order guides need to be printed and distributed, **saving the company time and money on a weekly basis.** POW has made it much easier for each salesperson to write up returns and pickups. This eliminated extra responsibility at the office, freeing up the staff to do something besides re-key handwritten orders. "We can also print their receipt or a shelf label right in the store," added Lowery. Salespeople have more time to spend with each customer which strengthens relationships. The sales force also has more time and easy access to all the information they need when they're prospecting for new business.

Building For The Future – Technical support, according to Lowery, is "**great, they're always helpful** when I call in or email in. I always get a good response. Sometimes we need to web conference but the issue always gets resolved." Lowery also mentioned that the implementation staff "**knew the environment like the back of their hand**" and provided excellent training. Parks' IT staff is currently working with Ai2 to expand the functionality of its sales rep and customer solutions.

As technology begins to permeate nearly every aspect of the business world, it is important a company ensures they are working with **a loyal, experienced and trusted partner--not just another vendor.** Every business needs to be at the top of their game to compete in this marketplace. With the advantages gained by Ai2's solutions and experience, Charles Parks is ready to take on their next challenge.