

RAC - Drive new standards with TaskMaster inspection solution

RAC Inspection Services are rapidly becoming an essential requirement for consumers who want peace of mind when buying a second-hand car – with an inspection consisting of at least 160 different checks.

RAC engineers can inspect a used car anywhere in the country, they do not need the potential buyer to even be present, they can come to vendor's places of work or their homes; the only proviso is that the vehicle is on level-ground for the inspection.

Situation

Until late in 1998, the inspection reporting was done manually. This made it a lengthy process and would often result in inaccuracies. First, an 'allocator' at RAC headquarters in Feltham left a message for an engineer on voice-mail. The engineer would then have to pick up these messages in the morning and take notes from them before setting off for the day. After the inspections the reports had to be hand-written and brought back to HQ, to be posted out to the customer. This system put an enormous strain on the organisation - not least through the sheer weight of paperwork generated by the 220,000 reports produced every year.

"We had a number of issues with the old system," says Adrian McCarthy, National Operations Manager (Inspections and Services), "from accuracy of information to the final presentation of the report to a customer. Quite frankly the manually-based system was coming apart at the seams and it was obvious that we needed to implement something better."

He was aware of the potential benefits of mobile data solutions, but was unconvinced that a solution existed that could specifically meet the RAC's needs: "I knew about what Apple were doing

with the Newton Message Pads and did take a real interest. Unfortunately though Apple withdrew the product from the market around the same time, which effectively put us back at square one."

The RAC were also facing some customer-focused issues which needed fixing. Quality was suffering in the reports being produced for customers. This was caused by a whole range of factors; from the engineer's handwriting being unclear to weather conditions physically damaging the reports. Adrian elaborates: "The British weather being as unpredictable as it is means that engineers find themselves sometimes in the most appalling weather conditions. Reports were arriving back to us at HQ looking as though they had been in a war-zone; hand-writing smudged by rain, bits of reports torn and tattered, not really a presentable state to send to the customer".

Solution Summary Industry

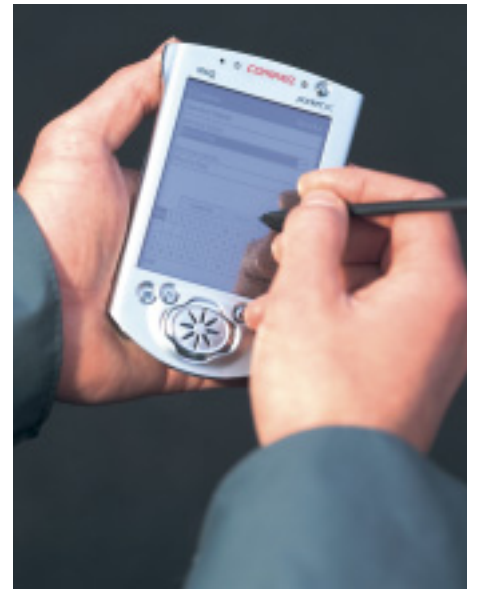
- Automotie - Customer Service

Scenarios

- Knowledge Management
- Customer Relationship Management
- Electronic Data Capture & Processing

Situation

The RAC Technicare® inspection service for used cars has been growing significantly each year since its inception. However, as the service relied upon hand-written notes to generate customers' reports, it soon became a victim of its own success and placed an enormous strain upon the organisation.



Solution

Inspection engineers now use a Windows CE powered Casio Cassiopeia PA2400U running the TaskMaster® field service automation software from TBS Systems Ltd. This allows them to capture all the relevant data for the vehicle inspection report easily and quickly at the point of action and transmit that data seamlessly to the report-generating back-end systems.

Benefits

- Saved approx. 20 minutes per report
- 50% reduction in process steps
- 30% reduction in stock write-offs
- 50% reduction in printings costs
- Improved customer satisfaction

Solution

A mobile data solution was high on the agenda for the RAC but Adrian was unsure where to look. Although he was aware of Psion and 3Com he believed they weren't what he needed; mainly because their machines would not fit into the RAC's existing IT infrastructure and neither the hardware nor software available were suitable.

In March 1998, the RAC was working quite closely with British Telecom (BT). BT introduced Adrian and his team to one of its solution providers who specialise in mobile data projects, TBS Systems. This was when the RAC got its first real look at what Windows® CE could do.

TBS Systems at the time was looking at the Casio Cassiopeia PA2400U. This robust, tablet form, pen-computer from Casio was developed specifically for fieldwork and is powered by Windows CE. Adrian McCarthy comments: "The first critical factor for us was that the device had to be rugged. We looked at some bigger laptop devices but found that this compounded our problems further. The machines weighed about seven pounds, which meant that engineers did not feel comfortable carrying the machine while inspecting the car, so they left it in the van and made paper based notes which they then transferred into the lap-top. This is exactly what we wanted to avoid." One other important criteria was cost. Rugged laptops cost around £3000 each, whereas the Casio PA2400 is priced in the £600 range.

In addition to the hardware, the RAC needed a tailored software solution to meet their needs. TBS Systems had developed an in-house solution called TaskMaster®, which consists of intuitive, easy-to-use electronic forms and menu driven pre-defined selection lists. "My eyes lit up when I saw TaskMaster," says Adrian, "TBS had developed a menu-driven solution for the Casio device which fitted our needs exactly. The solution has built-in flexibility and configurability, so it can grow and develop as and when we needed it to".



Implementation

The RAC and TBS began to roll out the devices on an evaluation basis in late 1998 backed up by TBS for both support and training RAC engineers. Adrian McCarthy continues: "The roll out of the Windows CE devices has been extremely smooth. We run four hour training sessions for our engineers and to date they have found it very easy to use".

RAC Technicare engineers now use the Casio PA 2400 Windows CE device both to receive new job allocations and to carry out the vehicle inspections. The link between the RAC's allocation database and the mobile device is supported via a GSM data-card link to a mobile telephone.

The engineers can use a state of the art thermal-imaging printer made by Pentax to print a one-page draft of the report on-site if needed. However, in most cases a detailed 4-5 page report is produced at Technicare HQ from the data sent in from the field. This enables the RAC to also include information about special offers or news and a customer questionnaire in the packet sent to the customer. And allows them to produce the reports much faster, and of better quality, than was possible with the old manual process

Conclusion

Feedback from both personal and commercial customers has been very positive. "There have been times in the past when customers received reports with mistakes or which arrived in bad condition. Today our customers are stunned by the quality, speed, efficiency and accuracy of the reports generated with the new system," adds Adrian.

Summing up, he says: "The RAC likes to be at the fore-front of technology and Windows CE delivers the goods. What we have been able to achieve with Windows CE was unthinkable 18 months earlier. We are convinced that Windows CE is going to be here for a long time, it's really given us a firm platform to build on in the future. I have no doubt that as the business grows, the use of Windows CE will grow with it.

For more information

TBS, The Ferns, 6 Derby Road, Belper, Derbyshire DE56 1UU.
Tel: +44 (0) 1773 596900.
Fax: +44 (0) 1773 596901
email sales@tbsmobility.com
Web www.tbsmobility.com