



Using F&I Technology to Save Time and Improve Efficiency

BY LISA GLADSTONE

Editor's Note: A frequently heard complaint from boat and motor dealers is that there's just not enough time in the day to accomplish all the tasks that one wants to complete. This is as true with sales, service, and repairs as it is for finance and insurance.

As part of its efforts to help dealers focus on the frontline of their businesses without wasting any time, Priority One has developed a proprietary software program to streamline the finance and insurance (F&I) process. This innovative technology will help dealers "create time" because it can improve efficiency and speed up communication.

We asked Lisa Gladstone, president and chief executive officer of Priority One Financial Services in St. Petersburg, Fla., to tell our readers more about this new technology to help F&I departments.

Technology description

The Dealer Resource Center (DRC) is proprietary F&I software. This Internet-based tool streamlines the complete F&I process and enables dealers to track the progression of a customer's loan with live data—from the moment a customer submits a credit application to the point of being funded on the contract by the lender. "Our dealers' needs drove the creation of this software," said Denise Rich-Wistoft, operations manager of Priority One Financial Services. "It's time-saving technology that assists busy dealers in numerous ways. DRC allows dealers to check the status of their finance deals without having to pick up a phone or send a fax. Additionally, it allows dealers to discover whether anything is missing from a deal that might delay an approval on a customer's loan. DRC also helps dealers track their F&I income by showing the latest profit on their finance deals."

One of the many features of DRC that dealers will appreciate is its ability to connect dealers with their individual loan consultants at Priority One. Much of a loan consultant's job is spent on the phone working with lenders and customers, so dealers may find it challenging to communicate with a loan consultant by phone without playing voice mail tag. With DRC, dealers will receive fast answers and quick information from their loan consultants without wasting time on the telephone.

The job of a loan consultant is not easy. He or she must thoroughly study every loan application and analyze each customer's credit history, diligently work with lenders to obtain a loan with the best options

for a customer, contact the dealer and the customer regarding a loan approval, arrange terms to keep the customer's payments affordable, explain extended service contracts, offer the best possible insurance package, and handle all F&I legal and compliance issues. If this weren't enough, the loan consultant needs to complete all of this quickly so that loan documents can be prepared and sent by overnight delivery or e-closing to the dealership.

Given these responsibilities, it is quite clear that the speed in which communication occurs between a dealer and his or her loan consultant is critical. DRC enhances the dealer/loan consultant communication through the use of an express online connection. Additionally, this immediate communication provides dealers with greater control of their sales.

Case history

Linda Noland, office manager of Cheek's Marine in Alexandria, La., finds that DRC streamlined her customers' loan approval process. "Once you log into DRC, you already have the basis of where your deal is and this lets you move ahead with the next step without an additional phone call to your loan consultant," said Noland. "DRC has accelerated the funding process by about 75% at our dealership. We usually see a loan approval within the same business day, which has helped us deliver more boats in less time."

Noland said that while time efficiency is one of DRC's most important attributes, she also appreciates its other attributes. "I enter the deal into the system, so there's no faxing involved. This really cuts down on all of the fax correspondence that usually piles up. I can also easily find the status of my deals and if I need to, I can communicate with my loan consultant in an instant. He and I still talk by phone, but those conversations are shorter now because DRC has prepped me for that call, and I already know the direction our active deals are headed," said Noland.

"Logging in to DRC is the second thing I do each morning after getting online. Once I log in, I keep DRC open all day," she noted. "The time-saving element of DRC is key for us. We work so many hours that anything which can save us a step or two is very much appreciated."

For Cheek's Marine, the DRC allows a dealer to access additional valuable services, such as information about special finance promotions. In addition, when dealers log into their secure accounts, they can also review the history of all funded deals, process online credit applications, access insurance or brokerage and consignment services, and order F&I supplies.

Because it is "living" software, Priority One believes that DRC will continue to be an effective F&I tool for dealers over time. "When feedback indicated that dealers wanted and needed a better way of tracking deals, we began development of DRC," says Mark Siler, vice president of technology for Priority One Financial Services. "Since DRC was initially introduced to dealers, we have continued to monitor their experiences with it. We listen to their feedback regarding additional features and this ongoing feedback enables us to continually expand DRC's capabilities. One of the features we plan to add will allow dealers to submit purchase orders online along with credit applications. F&I technological possibilities are endless," said Siler.

Industry viewpoint

Industry statistics show that technological developments have a substantial impact on small and mid-sized businesses. Large corporations no longer possess a distinct advantage over their smaller counterparts in this arena because access to the same technologies is now widely available. The key lies in finding and utilizing technology that enables everyone to improve and measure their productivity.

Monitoring the profits and performance of the F&I department is just as important to the dealership's overall success as monitoring the performance of the sales, service, and parts departments. DRC plays a vital role in monitoring F&I success because it gives dealers immediate access to deal history. Dealers are able to review all customer applications and deals funded throughout their partnership with Priority One. They can also request that the information be reported monthly, quarterly, or year-to-date, which gives them the ability to organize this information according to their own preferences.

As in other industries, technology is constantly improving the way people in the marine industry do business. It wasn't long ago that dealers spent hours at the typewriter filling in multipart forms. Along came computers and faxes, and paperwork became easier to complete. DRC is the latest development in the evolution of the F&I process.

The future development of technology-based applications to assist dealers will continue to be driven by their needs. Jeff Wacker, corporate futurist for EDS Corporation, predicts that 2008 will begin a new cycle of technological progress producing the next round of extraordinary advancements. Venture capitalists are predicting that mid-2007 will be the launching point for a host of new technologies-many of which will undoubtedly impact the way boat dealers interact with customers, enhance productivity, and stay competitive. In the meantime, as dealers continue their search for the 26-hour day, DRC is giving them extra time to sell more boats.

Lisa Gladstone is president & CEO of Priority One Financial Services in St. Petersburg, Fla. Priority One is an F&I managed-services provider serving the recreational industry since 1987. The company also provides hull insurance through its subsidiary, Veritas Insurance Group. Ms. Gladstone can be reached by phone at 800/747-6223 or via e-mail at lgladstone@p1fs.com.

MRAA Endorses Priority One as F&I provider

Marine Retailers Association of America (MRAA) has endorsed Priority One Financial Services in St. Petersburg, Fla., as the association's official full service F&I provider.

In making the announcement, Phil Keeter, MRAA president, said, "We are excited to bring Priority One's F&I services to our affiliated dealers. A professionally managed F&I program helps a dealership increase deliveries and profits, and Priority One is the oldest and most experienced F&I service provider in the marine industry."

Dealers who team up with Priority One through the MRAA will not only earn more money, but they'll also be supporting their industry association. Priority One will donate specific funds to the MRAA for every dealer who becomes a full Priority One partner and will continue to donate to the MRAA every time Priority One helps those dealers deliver a boat. "We tell dealers that this partnership makes 'dollars and sense,' " says Lisa Gladstone, president & CEO of Priority One Financial Services. "Our dealers will see their profits increase, and we'll be supporting the MRAA on their behalf. All of us at

Priority One understand the importance of supporting the MRAA, so it can tackle issues that matter most to our dealers, such as access to water.”

The MRAA is a vital voice in the marine industry with a mission of promoting the pleasure marine industry and welfare of marine retailers. Prior to the development of the MRAA, dealers had no voice within the industry and no control over the issues concerning them in Washington or with the manufacturers.

Priority One is the nation’s leading provider of finance and insurance solutions. Priority One provides complete F&I services to marine dealers and provides hull insurance to customers through its insurance division, Veritas Insurance. Priority One is based in St. Petersburg, Fla., and serves marine dealers, manufacturers, and customers across the country.

To enroll in the program, contact Jared Zimlin at 800/747-6223, ext. 211 and identify yourself as an MRAA member.