

Managing service & repairs

Managing service and repairs using an IT system not only makes retailers' lives much easier but also gives them a real competitive advantage, advises **Sonu Kundi**, commercial director of Cromwell Business Systems.

Fulfilling your obligations under the Sale of Goods Act entails some serious business decisions about the type and scale of your Service & Repair operations: whether to directly employ engineers in-house; to run a team of field engineers; or to contract out to third-party companies. Whatever you provide, you need reliable service management software. Unless you are handling a miniscule number of repairs, you can't realistically provide a professional service with paper-based job sheets or spreadsheets to track job statuses, order spares and manage the customer and supplier communications.

A comprehensive software system, such as Cromwell's Open-Retail, will make easy work of fault-to-fix projects. If you have more than one location, a customer can bring their faulty item into any store and you can see immediately where and when they purchased it, its previous repair history and its warranty status. If they originally purchased the goods elsewhere and you have never stocked the item, you can quickly set up a unique item.

Amongst the many advantages of computerised service & repair is that when a faulty item is brought into your store, you can check if the customer is in arrears, and take appropriate steps. You can hold different addresses for the item, including the address of the purchaser; the address where it resides; and the billing address such as a third-party insurer. You can record the condition of the product; list all the accessories that arrived with it; and describe the fault. A good system offers numerous selectable

fault descriptions, cutting down on typing. It also handles loaning the customer a replacement item, providing them with repair estimates and quotes and taking deposit payments.

Once the item is booked in, the system arranges despatch to a service location; allocates an engineer; orders and tracks spares; manages contacts with suppliers, manufacturers, insurers and customers by letter, e-mail and SMS; plus notifies you when jobs are overdue and completed. Timesheets on the system track how long a repair is taking, and record actual time spent on each job by the engineer as well as the time to be charged to the customer. You can also ensure that any loan items are returned before each job is fully closed. Finally, the system handles all aspects of the manufacturer claimback process.

If a customer contacts you about a faulty item that is too bulky to bring into the store, the system facilitates rapid checking of the customer and product records; the efficient logging of the service job, despatch of a collection van; delivery of any loan item; and booking of a field service engineer. Refurbishment jobs are also handled efficiently – managing the entire process to return every item to your store in 'as-new' condition so you have maximum re-sale or re-rental value.

There are also strategic advantages to managing service & repair via an IT system. You can identify when particular products repeatedly suffer the same types of fault. Armed with hard evidence, you can inform the manufacturer or decide not to

stock those susceptible products in the future. Similarly, for rental assets you will have a complete service record and can determine when to remove individual products from your rental stock.

Contrast all this super-efficiency with a manual system in which job sheets have no link to customer records and there is no automated tracking of repairs. If a customer rings to enquire about their repair, you cannot update them on its status without locating the physical records and probably also making a 'phone call to the service centre or third-party repair provider. With an integrated IT system, every stage of the repair is totally transparent to any authorised person within your business, wherever he or she is located.

Managing service & repairs operations professionally gives you a competitive advantage. Customer and supplier communications can be undertaken by well informed and proactive staff. Expensive administration tasks and 'phone calls can be minimised and transport costs reduced. Engineers, whether in-house or third-party, can be made more accountable for the quality and timeliness of their repairs. You can increase business by taking in repair jobs for customers that have not previously bought from you. Rental businesses can be made more profitable through cost-effective refurbishment programmes.

Using IT to manage your fault-to-fix obligations has never been more necessary – or worthwhile. ■

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