



Ecommerce Enabler

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Bozzuto's has applied wireless ecommerce systems to its food shows and a major fund-raising event, earning itself SN's Technology Excellence Award in the wholesaler category

As a food wholesaler in the Northeast and Mid-Atlantic states, Bozzuto's is not only responsible for buying and shipping products for independent retailers operating about 900 stores, but also for fostering one-to-one business relationships between the retailers and product manufacturers.



From left: John Keeley, Steve Methvin and Dan Krhla, Bozzuto's

The retailers are given a prime opportunity to buy products from the manufacturers and brokers at low prices, and negotiate additional savings for promotions, at Bozzuto's two-day Independent Retailer Conferences, which are held twice a year at either the Foxwood Resort Casino or Mohegan Sun in Connecticut. The vendors are also able to introduce new products and programs at these conferences.

To make the conference experience more valuable for both retailers and manufacturers, Bozzuto's has since 2007 deployed a number of technologies that facilitate conference

logistics — such as registration and entry to the trade show — as well as commerce on the trade show floor. These technologies include everything from a Microsoft .Net architecture and wireless tablet PCs to an RFID tracking system, a mag-stripe card for each retailer and wireless kiosks that generate summary reports for retailers and vendors. Total investment: about \$500,000, said John Keeley, vice president of information systems for Bozzuto's.

In addition to its food wholesaling role, which generates about \$1.5 billion in annual wholesale revenues, Bozzuto's has also distinguished itself for its philanthropic activities in New England, particularly its support of the Special Olympics. Bozzuto's partners annually with the Hometown Foundation to sponsor the annual Dream Ride for Special Olympics of Connecticut, a fund-raising event supported by motorcycle and car enthusiasts.

The success of Bozzuto's wireless ecommerce platform at its 2007 and 2008 retailer conferences led the wholesaler to adapt the technology in support of the Dream Ride last August. This enabled the event organizers to expand it from one location to eight across Connecticut, and in August the Dream Ride will be expanded to 17 locations throughout Bozzuto's marketing area, greatly increasing participation and donations.

For deploying wireless ecommerce technologies to enhance both its retailer conferences and a major fund-raising event, Bozzuto's has been selected as the winner of the *SN*'s 2009 Technology Excellence Award in the wholesaler category.

‘TREMENDOUS IMPROVEMENT’

For the retail conferences, which attract about 900 attendees, Bozzuto's has replaced a paper-intensive registration process with an online system. Retailers, suppliers and Bozzuto's employees register at a website established for each event “to build excitement about the speakers and venue and remind people to save the date,” said Steve Methvin, vice president of retail technologies and ecommerce systems for Bozzuto's. Retailers can also pre-order products on the site.

Retailer and supplier registration information populates a Microsoft SQL database used to support the conference. For suppliers, that data includes information from Bozzuto's “enterprise system,” said Keeley. Each supplier's data is assigned to the booth that it occupies on the trade show floor, which is designed to emulate the layout of a supermarket, with produce suppliers in one section, grocery suppliers in another, and so on.

“This allows us to divvy up the information so as retailers walk the floor, they're only presented with information relevant to the transaction at each booth,” said Methvin.

Jim Mirabito, owner, Village Market IGA, Hannibal, N.Y., regards the online registration and ordering system “a tremendous improvement” over the way he used to do business at the food shows. “Online ordering allows you to organize your thoughts ahead of time,”

he said. Then at the show, “you have time to talk to vendors, and see new items and new concepts that can advance your business.”

To implement its wireless platform at the conferences, Bozzuto's leverages the network of the host facility, which in March was the Foxwoods MGM Grand, Ledyard, Conn. But before the casino would lend Bozzuto's its network facility, the wholesaler's employees must undergo a thorough background check and be fingerprinted.

When attendees arrive at the conference, they receive a name badge with an RFID label applied to the back; retailers are also given a mag-stripe RSVP (retailer-supplier valued partner) card. With strategically located RFID readers, attendees bearing a name badge are tracked as they enter the trade show floor; a display flashes a message welcoming each attendee by name. Keeley likens the use of this RFID technology (provided by Cathexis, St. John's, Newfoundland) to the RFID-based toll-payment systems used at highway toll booths.

Bozzuto's much prefers the RFID system to scanning each attendees badge or asking them to show a ticket. “We don't want to ask our best customers to identify who they are,” said Methvin.

RFID data on attendee movements is fed wirelessly to servers, which generate reports on attendance on other metrics. “We know how much time people spent at events, which helps us judge their effectiveness,” said Methvin.

The RFID data also helps Bozzuto's plan for meals by giving exact numbers on meal attendance. Typically fewer people show up for breakfast — and more for dinner — than are expected.

Very few attendees have an issue with the RFID tracking, said Keeley. “It's so non-intrusive, most people forget about it.”

IN SYNC

At each vendor's trade show booth, retailers swipe their RSVP cards through a Bozzuto's-supplied IBM tablet PC to call up order information previously entered online. “Everything is on the touchscreen; there is no flipping through big binders.” said Methvin. “Retailers and suppliers can discuss terms and negotiate ship dates.” Signatures are captured electronically.

Retailers and manufacturers know that the information they are viewing on the tablet PC is in sync — that it represents “one version of the truth,” noted Methvin. “Now they can discuss what can be changed, such as dates and quantities.”

Keeley said that synchronized data is something that Bozzuto's has been emphasizing the past few years throughout its technology infrastructure. It is reflected in a year-old, online portal Bozzuto's retailers now use to enter orders and track deliveries.

Each day of the show, order data is sent from each vendor's tablet over the wireless network to a central server, which can be accessed by kiosks on the show floor. Both retailers and suppliers can print out their orders at the kiosks. "Suppliers used to wait two weeks to get feedback on what they sold," said Keeley. "Now they have it automatically."

By printing out his orders at the end of the trade show's first day, Mirabito of Village Market IGA can "look for my mistakes and for opportunities I missed," he said. He can also sort the printout "20 different ways" to better organize it for his store employees. "That way they're not thumbing through the same pages looking for their department," he added. "That's really cool, a huge time saver."

The Bozzuto's executives believe the trade show technology has increased the sales volume generated at the trade shows, though they were not specific. But Dan Krhla, project leader, retail applications, for Bozzuto's, estimated that Bozzuto's investment in the technology was recouped "about halfway through the third show."

REPURPOSING TECHNOLOGY

Since 2001, Bozzuto's, in concert with its IGA Hometown Wheels program, and the Hometown Foundation have sponsored the Dream Ride, a motorcycle event designed to raise money for the Special Olympics of Connecticut. The event has so far generated more than \$800,000 in donations, but its fund-raising ability was markedly strengthened last year when Bozzuto's supported it with the ecommerce technologies developed for the retailer conferences.

IGA Hometown Wheels, a Bozzuto's-managed program that incorporates the wholesaler's IGA supermarkets and promotes numerous community fund-raising events, "saw the mobility of our [conference technologies] and asked if it could be adapted to support the annual Dream Ride for Special Olympics of Connecticut," said Methvin.

What was traditionally a one-location event was transformed, through the application of the ecommerce platform, into an eight-location event last August throughout Connecticut, with more than 2,000 participating motorcycles and about \$100,000 donated. The riders all converged at the event's focal point in Farmington, Conn.

Buoyed by last year's results, Bozzuto's plans to more than double the number of Dream Ride locations to 17 for this August's event, stretching the geographic area to include Maine, Vermont, Massachusetts, Rhode Island, New York and Pennsylvania. The event will also include a Dream Show model car show, sponsored by Papa's Chrysler Dodge Jeep, New Britain, Conn.

"We doubled the number of riders last year and we expect to double it again this year," said Methvin, who observed that unlike many philanthropic retail programs, the Dream Ride event is not funded via CPG companies, but by consumers.

For the Dream Ride and Dream Show, Bozzuto's leverages AT&T's wireless network and receives web support from New Wave Industries, Newington, Conn., its Internet service provider. "The technology allows us to continue to spread out and scale the event," said Methvin. Bozzuto's is in discussions with Special Olympics International to expand the Dream Ride even more, possibly to a national scale.

Since Bozzuto's is repurposing the same technology used at the conferences for the Dream Ride, the net cost was largely related to time, noted Keeley. One adjustment was the installation of "military grade" fiber to boost the mobile communication capability at the Farmington convergence point.

Like retailer conferences, the Dream Ride offers participants online registration, during which they can make donations with a credit card. At each of the satellite locations, motorcyclists and their passengers sign in, swiping a credit card through the tablet PCs borrowed from the trade shows or having a bar code on their confirmation email scanned. "It's like airport check-in," said Methvin. "There's no waiting in line." Motorcycle drivers and riders also sign a waiver releasing Bozzuto's from responsibility for accidents; their signatures are captured electronically.

The tablets are linked to mobile printers borrowed from retail stores, which generate vouchers for the first thousand registered participants, who exchange the voucher for a special Dream Ride pin and T-shirt at the main location in Farmington. "We're able to give out a thousand prizes without lines," said Methvin. "There's no looking up names."

Riders can use their credit cards to purchase merchandise (bandanas, T-shirts, patches) at each location, thanks to mobile POS registers provided by Bozzuto's.

To track motorcyclists as they head toward Farmington, Bozzuto's stations employees at each satellite location who relays real-time traffic data via the web to dashboards employed by the Connecticut State Police. "We need to time the event so the motorcycles arrive in sequence and it's exciting and not a big traffic jam," explained Methvin.

Bozzuto's executives regard the conferences and the Dream Ride as only the first applications of ecommerce technologies. "We are working with the Hometown Foundation and our retailer partners to do other things for the community via the same technologies," said Methvin. "This is a great way to use technology to give back to the community in a way that doesn't increase the price of what we sell."