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HVAC Contractors Use High Tech to Stay in Touch

Business Technology Trends
focus

By John R. Hall
For *The NEWS*

Two HVAC contractors are using modern technology — iPads, GPS, and remote monitoring — to stay one step ahead of their competition and one step closer to their employees. Lane Associates of Island Park, N.Y., and Horwitz/NSI of New Hope, Minn., have embraced communications technology to help their employees work more productively and efficiently.

Tablets in the Field

According to Mike Star, PE, project manager at Lane Associates, the company has always been tech-savvy. “Lane Associates has stayed in front of the curve of technology throughout its nearly 70 years in the HVAC industry. In 1973, we purchased our first technological system, an IBM System 3 Model 10 computer that ran on 96 column cards and was the size of an entire conference room. At the time, we were the only contractor to have any type of a computer system,” he said.

“Since then, the size has obviously dramatically decreased and become faster and more efficient. Lane continues to grow with the technology, now conducting business on its fourth generation of accounting and computer systems.”

To further embrace change and technology, and in an effort to increase the ease and speed of transferring information and communication, Lane Associates introduced Apple iPads into its service field. “Each service technician carries an iPad equipped with the traditional Internet, camera, email, etc., and is able to transmit and receive information digitally to the corporate offices almost instantaneously,”



At Lane Associates of Island Park, N.Y., service techs have instant access to an endless amount of information in the field.

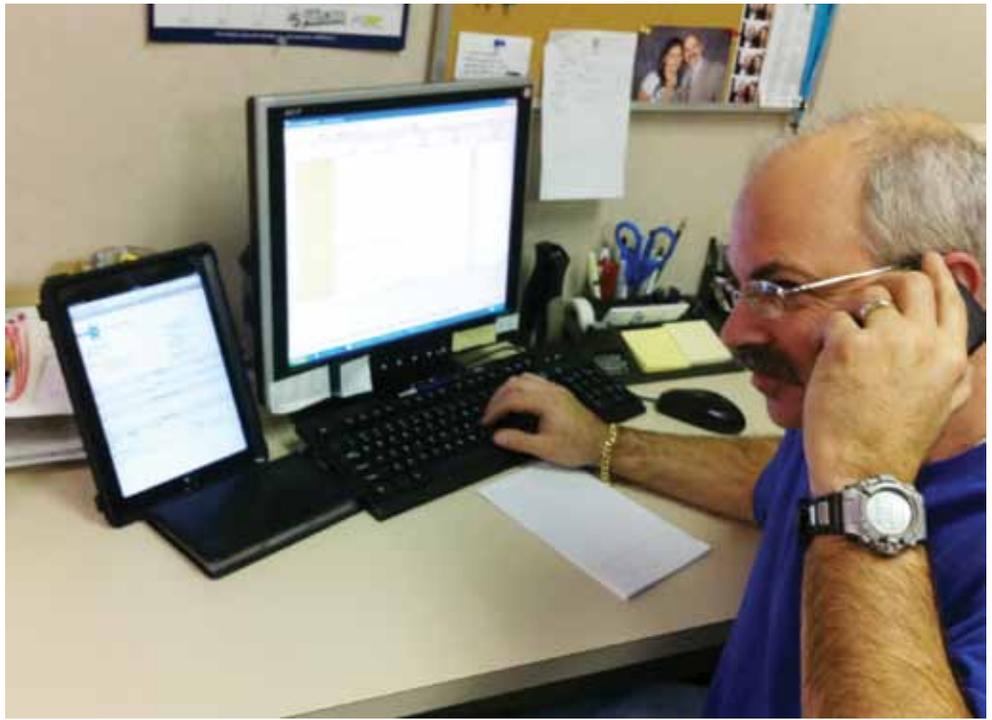
said Star. “Lane is continually training to stay ahead of the curve and in a continuous development to find other effective working applications, such as an online CRM system and other useful tools, to help everyone with iPads work easier, more efficiently, and effectively.”

“Using the iPads also allows for instant responses to customer inquiries from the Lane Associates website, and aids in dispatch to cover those emergency situations where service cannot wait.”

Star noted that modern technology allows

Lane Associates to operate almost completely paperless, and the contractor will continue to head in that direction as “our business plan, employees, and customers demand.”

He said, “Becoming a much greener company helps us reduce costs and provide better service. Simply put, using the iPads in our business is beginning to prove as a win-win for the customer and the company, and Lane is starting to see tremendous results. As technology advances, we will continue to improvise for further improvements to the HVAC industry.”



GPS and Monitoring Solutions

Pete Greene, new business development manager at Horwitz/NSI, said, "As a 75-year-old union service provider in the Twin Cities market, we are always on the lookout for methods to reduce our overhead and provide more value to our clients. At \$2/minute (\$120/hour) we are constantly being evaluated by our customers and asked why we are so expensive, and have to justify our worth."

In 2010, Greene said that Horwitz/NSI began its search to identify and implement a GPS strategy to reduce fuel costs, improve service response time, and provide additional backup for its fleet of 20 service technicians.

"We initially implemented a GPS system from Pedigree Technologies about halfway through 2011, and have found it to be working rather well," he said. "We installed a large monitor next to our dispatch desk that shows a map of the region, all our trucks, and their corresponding locations."

He added, "We routinely complete a few exercises to ensure we are receiving the benefits [of the system]." These exercises include reviewing weekly travel routes to ensure efficient travel by the technicians, and ensuring that after a service call has been received, the closest technician with the proper skillset to take the call has been located, with the goal to improve response time.

Greene also noted, "When clients call in to discuss billing time, we are able to provide backup showing electronic proof that our vehicle and tech were on site during the time we billed for."

In addition to its GPS system, Horwitz/NSI also learned about Pedigree Technologies' One View system. "This system is a real-time moni-

Information can be seamlessly sent from the office to the field (top left). Information can be quickly relayed from the office to phones and tablets in the field (top right). Software is available to accept digital signatures and interface with customers (bottom right).

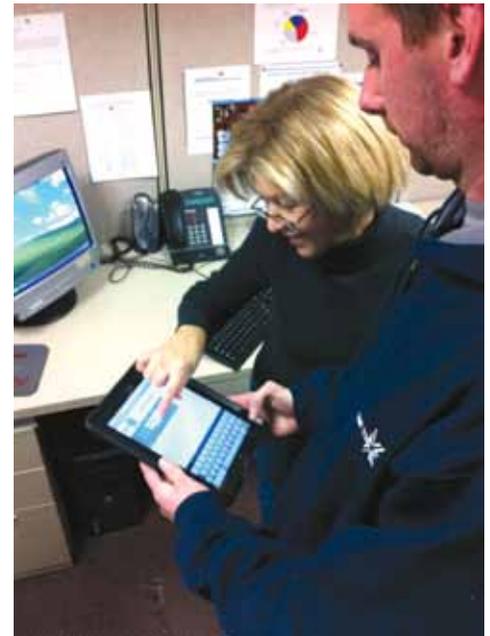
toring system that has enabled us to monitor a client's critical equipment and make important decisions regarding energy use, operating issues, and service calls," Greene said. "We currently have about eight of these systems up and running."

He cited two examples of how One View has helped his clients.

"Viterra, a local pasta company, has had numerous issues with their larger semi-hermetic air conditioning compressors," Greene said. "We have replaced six in the last 24 months due to failure. We recommended the One View monitoring equipment be installed and ongoing monitoring and notification of alarms set up. Within the first month, we were notified by the system that there were adverse conditions taking place that, without immediate attention, we would run the risk of damage and/or failure of the compressor. Upon receiving the alarm data, we called the client and discussed the issues and promptly dispatched our techs to rectify the situation.

"Additionally, we've been alarmed in the late evening that units were running during low temperature conditions, and were able to contact the client again to set up service and save another compressor. The client, as well as Horwitz/NSI, has the ability to see the alarms and the reporting features, and has become as big of a proponent as we are."

Greene also described another client that has benefitted from One View. "Andrew Tool, a local precision product development group



who has been a service client of ours for several years, had recently complained about the high frequency of calls on the a/c unit serving their data room. Our recommendation to install, monitor, and proactively act upon data we'd receive was welcomed with open arms. Within the first two weeks of operation, the One View notified us that the temperatures were rising in their server room, and we were able to call and set up a service call to rectify the situation.

"This is truly a conditions-based maintenance tool. The client has been very happy with the outcomes, and, quite frankly, feels we are now doing a better job maintaining their systems because of the One View," Greene summed it up. **N**