



ERGONOMIC FURNITURE AND BACK COMFORT PRODUCTS RETAILER PROFITS FROM MULTI-CHANNEL SELLING

Whether it's web store sales, phone orders or sales made at their state-of-the-art retail stores, Backs Etc. is expanding its market research
by Andy Shaw

The two owners of Backs Etc. are happy to admit they are mighty picky about the lines of ergonomic mattresses, pillows, chairs, recliners, massagers and other stress relievers they sell. They're also pretty discriminating when it comes to selecting all their other business etceteras - including what point of sale, inventory management, and other business and accounting software they use. Most recently, they chose Oneir Solutions' breakthrough Linux-based business package - a complete hardware and software solution for expansion-minded retailers - after yet another careful search for just the right thing. The choice has enabled Backs Etc. owners to realize a long-held dream. They've taken the first step to potentially expanding their empire country-wide, by adding prototypical new store.

And is it some store. Walk in off Yonge Street in the middle of its stylish stretch in north-end Toronto and you spot mid-store, a huge Plasma video screen, fronted by a curved cappuccino bar counter and two leather-covered stools (ergonomic, of course).

"We offer over 1,500 combinations of items, so they can't all be displayed in the store," explains Backs Etc. founder and managing director Alex T. Neuman. "So if the customer can't find what he or she is looking for, or wants more detail about a possible purchase, we can sit them at the bar and have one of our staff take them straight into our website and inventory database via that big Plasma screen."

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What the customer does not see is what Oneir is doing in the background, once a sale is made. For one, what is sold in the new store goes instantly into the company's books and can be viewed by Neuman and his partner back at the original store and head office several kilometers away.

"The logistics of running a single store are quite simple," says Neuman. "But when you get into running a multiple store set-up you need an Accounting System that's more robust, more comprehensive and yet is still affordable."

Adds co-founding partner and director of operations, Gary Lands: "You also want a platform for future growth. And that's what Oneir gives us. At any time from our desktops, we can hook directly into our locations and see what is happening financially to our business, as it is happening. We didn't want to rely on overnight polling. We wanted to exercise real, up-to-the-minute, head-office control. And it doesn't matter if we have two, or if we have 10 locations or more, the system is easily extended."

That ability to grow with the business is rare, if not unprecedented, for an accounting package suitable to expanding small and medium sized businesses.

And it comes chiefly from:

- The nimbleness and speed of the Linux operating system running on a dedicated Oneir built server, which can carry out real time communications between sites over regular telephone lines
- The online training of users as well as the remote installation and troubleshooting available directly from Oneir support staff as part of the package
- The rock-solid reliability of the Oneir package's Point of Sale POS Software, Inventory Management System, Sales Order Software General Ledger Software and seven other accounting modules, which have been in constant development for over 20

years

But how could an outfit so new (Oneir Solutions began business in 2003) have a product with such a long history?

Neuman and Lands know how come.

"When we decided that what Canada really needed was a good back store and formed Backs Etc. in 1997, we did our due diligence and went looking for an off-the-shelf accounting package that was appropriate for us and our single store," says Neuman. "We spoke to a number of people and that led us to Vigilant Solutions. We've been a very happy user of Vigilant Point of Sale and Accounting Software at Backs Etc. since day one. And now the interfaces we see on Oneir are virtually the same as Vigilant's.

That's no surprise to Jane Giggall, Oneir's President, who says, "We knew we had one of the top business and accounting packages based on the response from the only judge that counts, our customers. We wanted to take this foundation and create the best product for those customers with more than one location. The response has been overwhelming. The number of single location companies that have identified Oneir as their ultimate solution is a welcome surprise. It truly makes dreams a reality.

"When we saw what Linux could do for businesses with more than one location, we wanted to bring a total focus to serving the market. So we created Oneir but carried over all the functionality and reliability of the Vigilant software."

Still, even given that happy history with Vigilant, Neuman and

Lands did not migrate Backs Etc. immediately over to Oneir without, you guessed it, careful consideration.

"We found nothing else like Oneir, however," says Neuman. "It not only does most of what far more expensive systems designed for big businesses do, Oneir is also interoperable with all our other applications including Windows, even though it is Linux driven. And aside from some wiring and other technical adjustments we had to make, the transition for our staff to a multi-site business has been quite easy."

What's also been made easy for Backs Etc. by Oneir is keeping meaningful track of sales no matter how they come in - from a store walk-in, over the telephone, or via that Backs Etc. e-Commerce Internet website that's on huge display at the new Yonge Street store.

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"The Oneir Solution really allows a retailer to become a multi-channel seller," says Jon Mainwaring, Oneir's Executive Vice President. "Most accounting packages can't really integrate sales data very well or quickly when they come from different sources, but Oneir can. It tracks customers' orders no matter how they order. So owners can take both micro and global look at their customers, their inventories and their profit centers. And they can do that by pulling up a number of Oneir's templated reports whenever they want to."

That means owners of multi-site retailers like Backs Etc. can:

- See which products, product lines, categories, and remote sites are selling best
- Sort bestsellers by high to low margins
- See percentages of sales stemming from each product or category
- Through its wholesale/distribution module integrate online catalogues, sales orders, pick and pack lists, shipping instructions, and layaways for items on back order
- Keep complete records of customer-by-customer buying habits
- Build targeted direct mail and other sales campaigns

"No other package we know of that's affordable to smaller businesses integrates all this into one system," says Oneir's Giggall. "And I think one of its outstanding benefits for companies as a result is that Oneir can lay a foundation for expansion. If you're pulling in e-commerce, or phoned-in orders from Vancouver, for example, or some other distant town, you can start building a community there, because Oneir keeps you up-to-date about who your customers are, where they are and what their buying preferences are. That means, if you decide to put a store in Vancouver, or elsewhere, you're not going in there cold. You've already got a customer base in place."

So don't be surprised if some day soon a Backs Etc. store pops up in your neighborhood.

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