



topVOX Selected As A 2009 Innovator by Food Logistics

2009 innovator [1] topVOX 'hears' the cry for low-cost voice solutions

Voice-directed picking solutions have come a long way over the past 10 years. Thanks to continual improvements in its capabilities, such as being able to better "hear" workers voices and screen out background noises, coupled with a quick payback and as much as a 50 percent reduction in errors, the use of voice technology has become common in today's food and beverage warehouses.

While the voice technology playing field in the United States has been dominated by a couple of leading solution providers, a small European company has slowly and stealthily developed a loyal client base in North America, Mexico and beyond.

That company, topVOX Corp., a subsidiary of the German company TopSystem, is the European market leader in voice technology. In recent years, however, firms such as third-party logistics provider ODW Logistics Inc. in Columbus, OH; Cooper-Booth Wholesale Co., a convenience store and restaurant distributor in Pennsylvania; and Bepensa, a Mexican distributor for Coca Cola beverages, have chosen solutions from topVOX.

What sets TopVOX's solution, topSPEECH-Lydia, apart from its competitors, says Andreas Finken, president and general manager for the company's North American office in Barrington, IL, its system was the first hardware independent solution available on the market, meaning that the software can run on any device, regardless of vendor.

"Hardware from different manufacturers, such as Symbol, Intermec and LXE can be used, allowing our customers to select both their devices and operating systems from a competitive market, according to their specific preferences," says Finken.

Another key differentiator is that topVOX features an open standards architecture, so it can integrate directly with standard warehouse management systems (WMS), including SAP, MARC Global and RedPrairie, and easily integrates into these solutions. Mobile units using topSPEECH-Lydia are easily linked to the WMS as they require no middleware.

These capabilities drastically reduce start-up costs for companies that are implementing a voice solution, as topVOX can literally work with any existing WMS as well as any hardware that may already be in use. Further, a company can choose which voice-capable hardware vendors they would prefer to work with, and make decisions based on durability, price, etc.

"Another plus," says Marceline Absil, topVOX's vice president of sales and marketing, "is that topSPEECH-Lydia offers speaker-independent speech which eliminates the need for new workers to 'train' the system to their voices. This greatly reduces the amount



of time takes for the system to recognize the workers' voices."

For many solutions, this process can take weeks, but pickers can be up and running in a matter of minutes with topVOX.

In addition, workers report that they enjoy the sound of topSPEECH-Lydia's voice. "The real, natural speech output is an important criterion for our customers because it helps to achieve a high degree of acceptance from the picking personnel," says Finken. "It's also easy to hear. We offer a headset called 'NoiseMaster'

that is capable of filtering out loud, dynamic noises, like loud explosive noises over 94 db, thus increasing the speech recognition rate significantly."

Voice In Action

European companies such as SPAR, a supermarket retailer and Walther Alben und Rahmen, a manufacturer and distributor of photo albums, are fans of topSPEECH-Lydia.

"We chose topVOX because it integrated into our SAP system," says Wolfgang Maehr, general manager of the SPAR distribution center in Zurich, Switzerland, which implemented the solution in 2007. "We looked at a variety of systems, but we found that the quality and price of topVOX were both excellent."

SPAR delivers to 160 supermarkets in northern Switzerland, including 110 independent retailers, plus 430 convenience stores. It carries 8,000 SKUs and handles 2.5 million items per month. Prior to using topSPEECH-Lydia, SPAR was using hand-held scanners in the picking area, but the company wanted to increase productivity and accuracy, as well find a solution that was ergonomically better for its employees.

Hands-free operation has been one of the biggest benefits of the solution, according to Maehr. "Our employees are handling big cases

of fruits and vegetables and its difficult to use a scanner. With topSPEECH-Lydia, they can walk and talk, so it's more ergonomic. Our average productivity range increased 10 percent. Our accuracy also increased, so there's no longer a check at the SPAR stores we service. We now have about one mistake in every 5,000 picks. It was a surprise that the accuracy was better than radio frequency."

In fact, the technology has enabled SPAR's orders to become so accurate that its own retail stores no longer have to check the orders as they arrive at the loading dock.

Currently between 80 and 90 pickers are using the solution and Maehr says that the employees quickly embraced the solution—thanks to the sound of Lydia's voice. Implementing topVOX has enabled SPAR to take on new business. "We were able to increase the number of SKUs we carried and stores we serviced without adding any employees," says Maehr.

Walther Alben und Rahmen also reports a great deal of success with topVOX. "We're using voice for pick and replenishment, and this solution has proven to be more effective than their competitors," says Oliver Jordans, general manager, Nettetel, Germany.

The company has been manufacturing and distributing photo albums throughout Europe and worldwide for 20 years. It was using a paper-based picking system and wanted to improve accuracy and reduce product damage—especially broken glass from the picture frames.

Walther Alben selected topVOX because it easily integrated into its existing WMS. "TopVOX was the only vendor who could work with hardware from HP, which we were already using. We wanted to buy standard hardware and use pocket PCs—we wanted to be able to replace any hardware on our own," says Jordans.

The company implemented the system in 2006, starting with a five person pilot. "The pickers were part of the decision team and we made sure that they were well trained, which helped make the implementation time very short," says Jordans. "Our employees like the voice system—it makes them feel a lot better about their jobs. And it's increased their productivity, without extra work.

"The integration time was only four to five weeks and a huge issue for us was background noise, but that proved to be no problem with topVOX," says Jordans.

Today, 10 pickers are using voice and the company no longer needs to use seasonal temp help. Jordans says that, since using topVOX, its picking and replenishment is 99.99 percent accurate. At receiving, the company no longer needs to do quality control.

"We've reduced manpower costs and increased revenue using the same amount of employees," says Jordans. "The system paid for itself in one year."

That's a typical payback for most of topVOX's customers, says Finken. "Depending upon the solution that is replaced by topSPEECH-Lydia, the ROI is usually less than a year. Some of our customers have realized a ROI within a few months."

Finken adds that topVOX provides a turnkey solution for its customers. "We offer concept design, requirements specification, project planning, delivery of hard- and software, installation, training, system support and maintenance," he says. "Our service personnel are constantly



available for customer support, troubleshooting or updating after the initial installation and training. We offer system support on a long-term basis, basically as long as the customer desires it. We also continue to develop our products and make adjustments to the market."

Within the next year, topVOX plans to publish a major release that will include VOIP (Voice over IP) technology to enhance the performance of speech-based technology. "topSPEECH-Lydia will fulfill all the new technical standards in the field of radio security, which is most important to our customers," says Finken. "We expect that the general development of the computer-based technology will enhance the performance of our speech recognition software even more."

The company also plans to expand its customer base. In addition to the food industry, topVOX is targeting beverage suppliers, small, bulk and replacement part suppliers and the automotive industry—all environments where voice recognition software is a perfect fit. ☘

topVOX
The Choice for Voice

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