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Putting the Value Back Into Value-Added Network

Auto parts maker JL French expands capabilities with iConnect's Hybrid VAN Mailbox

As much as Electronic Data Interchange (EDI) and the Value-Added Networks (VANs) that provide it have proved indispensable for manufacturing over the last decade, much of the corporate landscape of VANs has changed drastically. What should trading partners expect from VANs in the decade ahead?

One example of a new outlook is JL French, a manufacturer of cast aluminum components and an international Tier 1 automotive supplier, headquartered in Sheboygan, Wisconsin. Freedom Ryan, the EDI coordinator at JL French, says that she's getting more value out of her Value-Added Network by moving to a blended services package like one offered by the Ann Arbor-based VAN iConnect. JL French receives a more flexible way to add vendors and access data, and has lessened headaches when it comes to backup, connectivity, and making changes to data.

"iConnect coordinates the differences in data communications between suppliers and customers just like other VAN providers," says Ryan. "But they also give me capabilities that the other VANs don't have."

iConnect augments JL French's own EDI translator and proprietary software with the infrastructure of iExchangeWeb, which supports EDI for all formats of data from clients as diverse as International Truck, Ford or JL French Suppliers.

The centerpiece of the service package is the Hybrid VAN Mailbox. The Hybrid VAN Mailbox conducts JL French's high volume of transactions through one central repository, dually output as raw EDI and Web-readable data. Ryan can view an extensive history of past transactions securely through iExchangeWeb. iConnect's EDI/Web functionality is also bidirectional, so customers can make EDI transactions via Web-based forms as well. If shipping circumstances change in the middle of the night, Ryan can even create backup Advance Ship Notice (ASN) or make EDI corrections away from the office.

"iConnect offers iExchangeWeb translation services in a unique application not provided by any other Value-Added Networks" says Kelli Long-Sisco, Director of Customer Service at iConnect, who expects iConnect's remote access and control capabilities to spread to iPads and other mobile devices in the near future.

Decreasing risk and increasing business

The fact that iConnect already serves a vast community of Tier 1 members means companies, like JL French, can choose a wide array of trading partners within the context of their monthly VAN subscription. And they can easily add new relationships without the steep upfront costs normally associated with establishing new EDI connections.

"Basically, if we want to add in a company like Huffy or International to the line-up, the data transfer functions are already there," Ryan says.

Long-Sisco explains how this flexibility offers a not only economical way for small companies to convey their ERP content, but also manage risk for large ones:

"I might have a large Tier customer, who can call me and say they're in negotiations with a new company and we want to subscribe as Web-only until we are confirmed as a supplier. Through iExchangeWeb, the cost for them to implement it is nominal. We will ask what transactions need to be done, implement whatever they need and have the transactions implemented in ten business days."

ERP mapping costs can be exorbitant - an amount even large manufacturers would be reluctant to put up for a deal that is tentative - the iExchangeWeb strategy limits risk, she says. Providing options to implement Trading Partner requirements in a timely and financially beneficial manner allows greater flexibility and opportunity for iConnect customers.

Striking a balance between cost and service

In the world of EDI, other costs associated with data handling can also seem at times excessive. Ryan, in her experience with other major VAN providers, found their billing practices dubious. Long-term contracts often lock in customers to deceptive fee structures.

"My previous VAN charged us per document and per kilo-character and then a monthly fee on top of that, just for having the service," recalls Ryan, "In a month's time, I would be moving literally hundreds of documents and millions of characters. I was spending \$5000-\$7000 a month just for the transfer of EDI data alone."

Long-Sisco describes iConnect's rates for its blended service packages as "competitive;" while prices might vary among customers, overall the company strives for transparency, with simpler price structures that correspond to the actual business benefits gained for the client. As a result, many customers of iExchangeWeb receive unlimited transfers, backup, and monitoring of their specific supply chain relationships for a simple contract rate.

"I get dual mailboxes, unlimited transfers, and unlimited transactions for a flat rate every six months," reports Ryan. "And with the consolidated services, I'm saving about \$3000 per quarter for EDI transfers."

"They were able to realize significant cost savings," says Long-Sisco, who visited with Ryan at JL French headquarters when iConnect initially developed their service solutions. But the real news is the improvement of JL French's business operations.

"Our focus is the success of the client's operations as a whole. What means the most to me is when I talk to my customers and tell they tell me, 'you and your team make me feel like I'm the only customer that you have.' We have over 4000 customers and if we can do that every single day then I we are doing our job. I don't care if you're a \$100 a month customer or a \$40,000 a month customer, I want them to feel that they are the only customer that we've got."

Perhaps the most crucial difference between VAN providers lies in the intangible. Ryan recalls her old VAN having a recording rather than a real person at the other end of the phone when her connectivity dropped, or failing to notify her when important transmissions were not getting to a trading partner.

"With iConnect, I don't have interruptions in connectivity. I have relatively few issues," says Ryan. "When I do, I receive impeccable service. I can call anybody over there at any time and get some one who knows my company and my situation."

The future of EDI belongs to those VANs who can cast themselves in the role of a customer-oriented advocate for larger business issues, rather than a mere gatekeeper to the supply chain.

"Now with iConnect," Ryan says, "I feel I'm getting three times as much in terms of value of services."

About J.L. French

J.L French is one of the world's leading global suppliers of die cast aluminum components and assemblies and the #1 lightweight component design and manufacturing partner for power train applications. Combining the best in North America and European manufacturing, J.L. French offers unrivaled technical support at every stage of the component development from design to delivery. For more information, please visit: www.jlfrench.com ([//www.jlfrench.com](http://www.jlfrench.com)).

About iConnect

iConnect, Inc. is a Michigan-based technology service provider strategically headquartered at Domino's Farms in Ann Arbor, Michigan. iConnect's Global Web EDI and XML any-to-any data transformation solution, iExchangeWeb, provides for the transformation and secure delivery of critical business information between organizations irrespective of data format, technology or language. iConnect's Value Added Network (VAN) service provides an organization with the ability to exchange any type of data with any Trading Partner, Portal or Exchange. iConnect is a privately-held and funded company with access to over 1500 IT professionals around the world to support the global E-Commerce efforts of our customers. For more information, please visit: www.iconnect-corp.com ([//www.iconnect-corp.com](http://www.iconnect-corp.com)).

The iExchangeWeb

ExchangeWeb services web forms are engaged for critical trading partners and this allows JL French to have redundancy to manage trading partner EDI requirements without having to contract a third party back up support.

iConnect developers are now developing expanded mailboxes that would operate on the iPad and other mobile devices.

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