

More than 750 hotels paying Uniguest to fill market vacancy

BY DAVE RAIFORD
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For conventioners and business travelers, the hotel they temporarily call the home office is often expected to have the same technical accouterment they've grown accustomed to at home.

Based on that, Shawn Thomas found the seeds for Nashville-based Uniguest, a software sales and service company focused on the hotel industry. Thomas' company, founded in 2002, specializes in setting up and serving computer work stations for guests in hotels. The company has contracts to serve more than 750 hotels in the United States and has inked deals with Embassy Suites Hotels and Marriott Hotels, among others. The Business Journal asked Thomas about his business and how it figures into the competitive business travel industry.

What does Uniguest do? We've got two different applications - one is an automated public PC work station and that has business center applications, such as Internet access, Microsoft Office and local printing from that PC. The other is a boarding pass printing application that allows guests to only access airlines that allow online check-in and boarding pass retrieval.

From a hotel company perspective, we use software that provides our first line of defense from customers - it prevents them from modifying the PC.

What do you mean by modify? Anything from modifying the wallpaper, the icons on the desktop, getting into the C drive and modifying network settings, changing the home page or downloading pornographic Web sites. On a proactive basis, we use security software and on a reactive basis, we give (24-hour) call center support and with that we provide remote access (where our technicians can fix PCs from an off-site location).

How did the company come into being? I've always been in sales. I was in insurance before I started Uniguest and I was approached by a gentlemen who was developing an in-room Internet access system for the hotel industry - and this was during the dial-up days. Every hotel room had a phone and a TV, and the idea was to create an Internet access platform around that. We started selling it to hotels and within a year broadband came out and shut that company down. But I started to get so many contacts and relationships that I wanted to stay with it. One of the biggest problems was that hotels had PCs available and had problems with guests making changes to the computers and most hotels don't have an in-house IT (information technology) staff.

Working with a third-party company, we developed a suite of applications and beta tested it with 20 properties in Memphis. I was going to fund the service on it with local advertising dollars, but I started getting calls from all over

the country (to sell directly) and we changed from an ad-driven model to a computer sales and service company.

So the market chose your course? It started with a concept and in any business you try to create a business model that will be profitable. The idea was one thing and it evolved into another.

draiford@bizjournals.com ■ 615-846-4252



Shawn Thomas