

## F R E E M A N

## Trade Show Producer Boosts Customer Satisfaction, Finds Competitive Advantage

### Overview

**Country or Region:** United States

**Industry:** Hospitality—Hotel and motel industry

### Customer Profile

Freeman, based in Dallas, Texas, has been producing expositions, conventions, corporate events, and exhibits for an array of clients since 1927. It has 4,000 full-time and 40,000 part-time employees.

### Business Situation

In tough economic times, Freeman wanted to expand its competitive advantage by increasing customer service even as it cut the cost of providing that service. It saw technology as its answer.

### Solution

Freeman created Concierge Elite, a solution running on Windows phones that enables exhibitors to track freight, and to make and track service requests, faster and more effectively than ever before.

### Benefits

- Speeds development
- Boosts customer service, satisfaction
- Delivers competitive advantage
- Helps retain customers

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Justin Bell, Principal, Credera

Freeman, a major producer of trade shows and conventions, plotted a course to steer through difficult economic times: Increase the quality of its customer service while decreasing its costs. The company saw technology as the way to achieve this. Working with Credera, a Microsoft Gold Certified Partner, Freeman developed Concierge Elite, an application for Windows phones and a companion Web-based dashboard. The solution tracks freight arrival and enables exhibitors during a show to register and track requests submitted to Freeman more quickly and effectively than ever before—while giving show organizers a clearer, more detailed, real-time view of show operations than was previously possible. Customer satisfaction has increased, and the company is better able to attract and retain customers even in tough times.



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### Situation

If you think a major convention or trade show is hectic when all goes well, imagine what it's like when something goes wrong.

Maybe equipment hasn't made it from the loading dock to an exhibition booth, or the overhead lighting in one part of the exhibition hall isn't working. Maybe an exhibitor hasn't received furniture or carpeting, or a booth has no power. Whatever the problem, exhibitors have to scramble among the crowds to get the information to the correct vendor, and then those managers have to scramble to address the problem as soon as possible. Given the short duration of most conventions and trade shows, there's no time to waste.

The Freeman company prides itself on smooth-running shows, where customer service helps to ensure that problems are few and are resolved quickly when they do occur. The 83-year-old event management company has reason to be proud. It produces more than 3,000 expositions, conventions, corporate events, and exhibits each year, including most of the 200 largest shows in the United States. Events can have more than 2,000 exhibitors and require Freeman to coordinate not only with the venue's staff, but also with a dozen or more subcontractors.

When the “Great Recession” hit, Freeman executives knew that they needed to keep two goals in mind if their company were to emerge relatively unscathed. First, Freeman had to redouble its emphasis on customer service. Such an emphasis couldn't be just a slogan; Freeman wanted to find ways to give even more value to its direct customers, the show organizers, and to their customers, the exhibitors. Second, Freeman had to cut costs—while still delivering that greater value. The executives had a plan.

“We needed to get more creative,” says Richard Maranville, Chief Information Officer, Freeman. “We thought we could achieve our goals to increase service and lower costs by adopting new technology.”

That technology would have to address the key pain points experienced by organizers and exhibitors at a typical show. For example, when an exhibitor wanted to report a problem or make a request for service, that exhibitor often would have to walk half a mile across a convention facility to get to a service desk. Once there, the exhibitor could wait in line for as long as a half-hour. Service personnel also would have to make the trek back and forth across a convention facility to respond to service requests, an inefficient use of their time for Freeman and the show organizer.

Perhaps the most significant issue, according to Katy Wild, Executive Vice President of Customer Relations at Freeman, was that of getting freight to and from the show floor. “Where's my freight?” is the most commonly asked question at the start of a show, Wild says. An exhibitor's trucking vendor might say that exhibition freight had arrived at the venue's marshaling yard—the check-in area—but it might take hours to get the freight to the exhibition booth. At the end of a show, it could take hours more for Freeman to deliver an exhibitor's empty containers to the booth so the exhibitor could pack up and go home. In both cases, the hapless exhibitor had little to do but wait—and stew.

Some problems got reported promptly; others were reported later or not at all. Certainly, there was no way for Freeman and its organizers to get an accurate snapshot of problems across the show floor. They had to rely on impressions received from the unrepresentative sample of exhibitors showing up at the service desk.

Figure 1. The Freeman Concierge Elite Windows phone application gives show personnel an at-a-glance view of exhibitors' requests and their status.

## Solution

The Freeman technology solution for those issues—called Concierge Elite by Freeman—came together rapidly in 2009. Some of the pieces of the solution already existed in-house at the company. The year before, Freeman had licensed a software application that tracked exhibitor service requests. And the company's Freeman Online Web-based application enabled exhibitors to register and place equipment orders for shows.

What was needed was a solution that encompassed these elements and more—including the ability to expose status information to organizers and exhibitors during a show. The new solution would also have to include data that Freeman had never tracked before, especially information about freight status at the loading dock

and the status of empty containers returning to exhibitors at the end of a show. And the entire solution would need to be convenient for exhibitors by bringing the information to them on the show floor, rather than requiring them to journey to a service desk.

## Choosing Windows Mobile

To help create the solution, Freeman turned to its longtime solution provider, Credera, a Microsoft Gold Certified Partner. "We needed a partner that could get up to speed quickly, that could integrate the solution into our heterogeneous environment at Freeman, and that had demonstrated expertise in the technologies we wanted to use," says Maranville. "Credera was that partner."

The centerpiece of the solution became a mobile device that the company's personnel on the show floor would carry with them during a show so that they could enter service requests into the solution while present at the exhibitor's booth. (See Figure 1.) And for that device, Freeman and Credera chose the Windows Mobile operating system and the Microsoft .NET Compact Framework. The solution is now being updated to Windows Mobile 6.5, after having been developed on a predecessor version.

"We didn't look at competitive mobile platforms—we didn't need to," says Maranville. "Windows Mobile and the .NET Framework offered us a quick development platform when time-to-market was a key concern. A Windows phone handles forms-based applications and data entry better than an iPhone or Blackberry device. And applications for Windows phones are easy to use—everyone knows Windows, so there's very little learning curve."

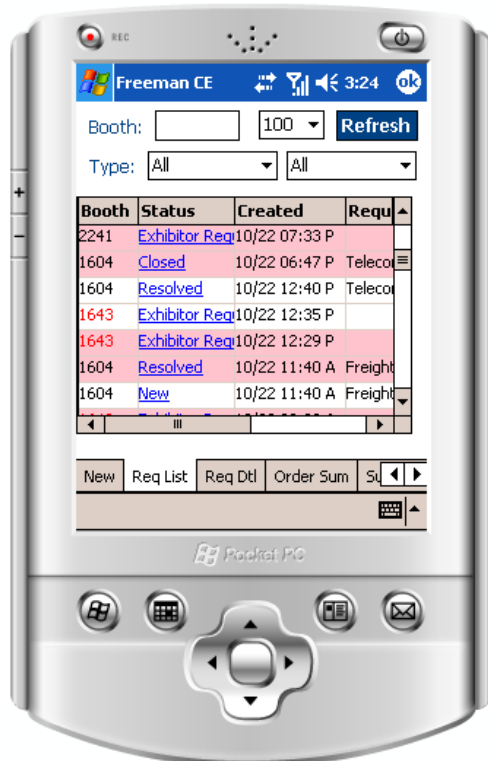


Figure 2. Managers and organizers track show status through a graphical, Web-based dashboard.

Development on Concierge Elite began in the summer of 2009. The solution was tested and put into production use at Freeman shows by the end of that year.

Shipments were already being tracked at the marshaling yard, but knowing when a shipment was at the booth was of greater importance. Show-floor personnel now use Concierge Elite on a dedicated Audiovox PPC-6700 Windows phone. They use the Windows phones to check in shipments at the loading dock, which triggers text or e-mail messages to exhibitors that their equipment has been unloaded and destined for their booths.

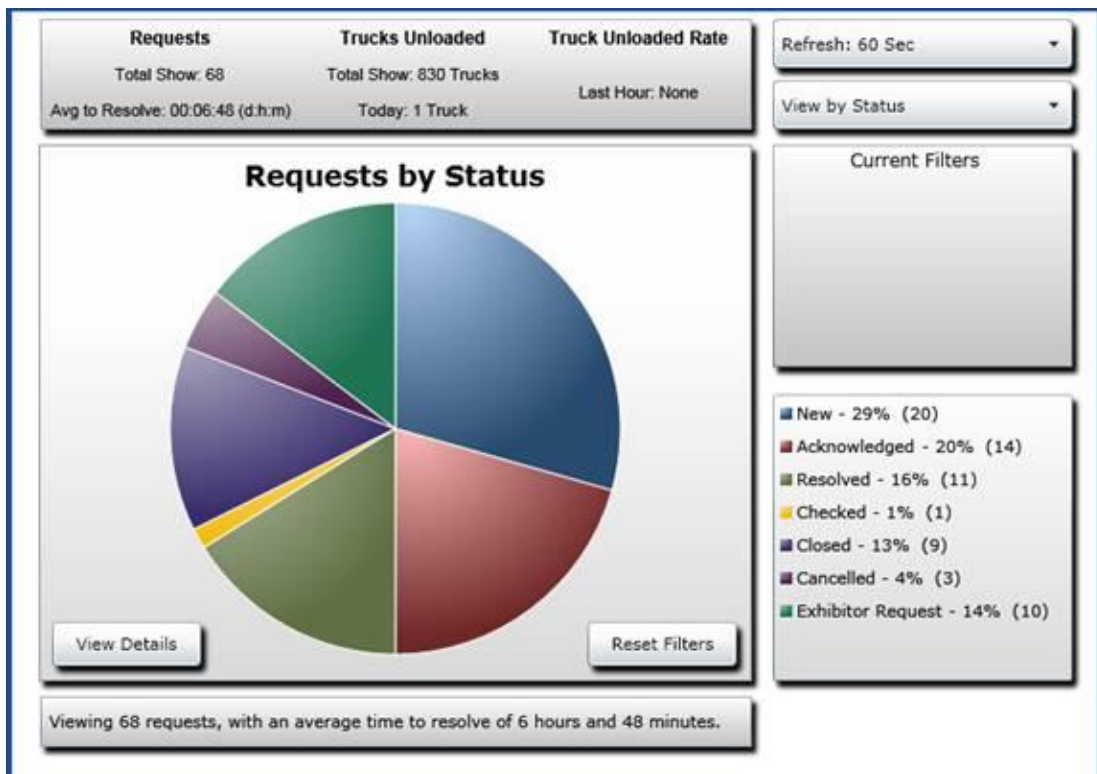
Throughout the duration of a show, Freeman personnel on the show floor continually check in with exhibitors and record any problems or requests. That

information is passed to a back-end system that displays the requests to Freeman managers, who assign personnel to address them. Those managers in turn update the status of the requests, and Freeman personnel can keep exhibitors informed of the status until the request or problem is resolved.

### Tracking Status

Meanwhile, Freeman managers and show organizers use a Web application to track both the overall status of a show and the status of every open request or issue. (See Figure 2.) The manager's version of Concierge Elite uses Web services to communicate with the same back-end system that communicates with the Concierge Elite software on the Windows phones.

The manager's software, built with the



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Microsoft .NET Framework 3.5 and the Microsoft Silverlight 3 cross-platform browser plug-in, displays its information in the form of a dynamic dashboard. An omnipresent ticker along the top of the dashboard constantly displays overall show statistics, such as the total number of trucks unloaded, total exhibitor requests received, average time to resolve requests, and so on. Below that, a pie chart categorizes requests by type, so managers can see which types of issues are generating the most requests. They can drill down on that data to get details on each category of requests, and drill down further to bring up individual requests to view and update their status.

At the conclusion of a show, Concierge Elite is used to track empty containers as they are readied for delivery to the exhibition booths. As with the initial unloading of freight, exhibitors can be notified by text message or e-mail when workers have delivered those containers to the booth.

Show organizers and management can use the information collected through Concierge Elite to identify areas of improvement and areas of service excellence. These metrics can also be reviewed each year to identify service-level agreements with suppliers.

### Benefits

Freeman and Credera were able to bring the robust, full-featured Concierge Elite to market quickly. Now, Freeman is delivering better customer service to exhibitors and organizers, customer satisfaction is rising, and the company is using Concierge Elite to successfully attract and retain customers.

### Speeds Development

Freeman met its time-to-market concerns by choosing the Windows Mobile platform and Microsoft .NET Compact Framework.

The solution was largely built over a six-week period and was ready for use prior to the company’s busy season, which starts in January.

Contributing to the fast time-to-market was the breadth of the Windows operating system platform and the interoperability of its components, according to Justin Bell, Principal, Credera. Reusability of code was another benefit: When the development team created the Web-based management interface for the solution, it was able to reuse code it had already developed for the mobile application.

“With the Windows platform, we didn’t have to worry about system components working together, from the user interface to the Web services to the back-end system,” says Bell. “We didn’t have to do as much development as we’d have done with another mobile platform, because Microsoft gives you so much functionality out of the box. We could just get started putting the solution together. Web service interaction is made incredibly simple with Windows Mobile and the Microsoft .NET Compact Framework. Microsoft does all the heavy lifting from a development-coding perspective. And the Microsoft development tools speed development even more compared to other platforms.”

“It’s amazing how fast it is to develop with Microsoft technologies,” adds Maranville.

In all, Bell and Maranville estimate that they saved two weeks of development by choosing to develop Concierge Elite for Windows Mobile—“two weeks of costs that didn’t show up in the bottom line,” says Maranville.

Freeman will continue to see these development benefits as it expands Concierge Elite—for example, by enabling

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exhibitors to bypass even the Freeman floor personnel by entering requests into the solution directly from their own phones.

#### **Boosts Customer Service and Satisfaction**

Concierge Elite meets its goal to enhance customer service, and does so in a variety of ways, according to Wild. A basic theme of the enhancements is that the solution gives more information to exhibitors, which they can use to make more effective use of their time.

For example, exhibitors save time when setting up for a show because they no longer have to wait in their booths—sometimes for hours—for equipment to arrive. They can arrange and hold business meetings, catch up on work, or relax, knowing that when their equipment is ready for them, Concierge Elite will send a text or e-mail message to notify them.

Similarly, they no longer have to wait in their booths at the end of a show until their empty containers are returned. Because a show ends at the same time for every exhibitor, and because Freeman can't deliver every container at the same time, some exhibitors used to wait minutes and others hours—but Freeman didn't have an effective way to get estimated wait times out to each exhibitor. Now, exhibitors can use their wait times effectively and return to their booths only after receiving notification that their containers have been delivered.

During the show itself, exhibitors who need to register a request are saved the often lengthy walk to a customer service desk, eliminating a gap when their booths would otherwise be understaffed. Because fewer exhibitors are showing up at the service desk, lines at the desks have been reduced.

That in turn also benefits exhibitors who choose or need to go to a service desk.

As a result, Concierge Elite has had a measurable effect on exhibitor satisfaction. Freeman takes exhibitor surveys—increasingly, now, through Concierge Elite itself. The surveys show that exhibitor satisfaction has increased for shows using Concierge Elite from the already high customer satisfaction rate that Freeman enjoys.

Show organizers, Freeman's immediate customers, have noticed the improvement in customer satisfaction. They've also noticed that Concierge Elite provides data on overall operations throughout a show—helping to assure them when all is well, and helping them to address any problems that do occur.

#### **Delivers Competitive Advantage, Helps Retain Customers**

Freeman doesn't charge show organizers or exhibitors for the use of Concierge Elite. Instead, the company sees the solution as a competitive differentiator, one that can help attract and retain customers despite a difficult economic climate. Early indications are that the company is right about that.

"We can deliver a huge change in the show environment that no one else has," says Toby Purdy, Chief Marketing Officer, Freeman. "Customers are impressed that we did this and that we don't charge extra for it. We market it as a service offering, and that's how they see it. It's definitely helped us to retain business."

"We want our exhibitors to walk away happy year after year," says Michael Grant, Vice President of Operations for show organizer Reed Exhibitions, a Freeman customer. "Concierge Elite makes a discernable difference in that it holds vendors and suppliers more accountable

## For More Information

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[www.microsoft.com](http://www.microsoft.com)

For more information about Credera services, call (972) 692-0010 or visit the Web site at:

[www.credera.com](http://www.credera.com)

For more information about Freeman services, call (800) 453-9228 or visit the Web site at:

[www.freemanco.com](http://www.freemanco.com)

because their performance is being tracked throughout a show. This motivates them to deliver great customer service, allowing our exhibitors to make the most efficient use of their time. Concierge Elite has been incredibly well received by our customers.”

## Windows Phones

For more information on Windows phones, please visit:

[www.windowsphone.com](http://www.windowsphone.com)

### Software and Services

- Windows Mobile 6.5
- Technologies
  - Microsoft .NET Compact Framework
  - Microsoft .NET Framework 3.5
  - Microsoft Silverlight 3

### Hardware

- Audiovox PPC-6700

### Partner

- Credera