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ISVS KEEPING THEIR FINGERS ON THE PULSE OF END USERS

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The SMB IT market is a large and at times inscrutable segment that many enterprise applications vendors and services providers have been eyeing for years. Over time vendors like SAP, Oracle and Microsoft have launched product and marketing initiatives to address this segment. Efforts have been mixed. SAP has had success with SAP Business One while Oracle makes little pretense anymore of addressing the SMB market.

What appeals to this segment is not always apparent and companies have spent countless hours and dollars surveying, segmenting and seminarizing in the hopes of gaining valuable insight and SMB market share. However a recent event has helped to illuminate what this segment is looking for and how several software vendors are working to meet their concerns.

Meridian Systems, SYSPRO and UNIT4 were spotlighted at the annual JRocket Marketing® (www.jrocketmarketing.com) Grape Escape analyst event in Boston. These scrappy vendors have been successful in US and European markets –and for Meridian, even Middle Eastern markets – by offering software products, services and new delivery models that meets client user needs. Further they are also introducing client to new IT modes like cloud computing and shared services to support SMBs as they determine the technology, licensing and cost implications.

Three customers of these vendors featured at Grape Escape spelled out their everyday concerns with IT; the need for good customer service from their vendors, low cost points to maintain their IT systems, greater product functionality and the need for flexibility to reflect changing business practices. These issues were stated as particularly acute for the SMB market because, if these issues are *not* addressed, the negative impact can be non-recoverable. In many ways SMBs are closer to their IT systems and therefore closer to their benefits and foibles.

So when SYSPRO announced expanded materials, inventory and cash management for its ERP system and Meridian launched a new cloud-based construction project management service, Prolog Sky, their customer base has immediate options to incorporate the new functionality or their new delivery model and feel the impact to their business bottom-line.

Perhaps most interesting of all was the UNIT4 announcement. UNIT4 offers both Agresso Business World enterprise resource planning (ERP) and Coda Financials software to its 6,000 customers. Its new cloud offerings is called "Shared Journey," and is aimed at local and regional governments, agencies and distributed business environments. Shared Journey offers an innovative subscription-based pricing model with shared license, maintenance and technical IT, and operational support services that are incentive based. This means the more organizations that join the Shared Journey cloud, the lower the monthly fee becomes

for all the other individual members. Because options are offered such as private and/or public cloud environments, a virtual machine environment of choice and redundant web backbone and data storage hubs, UNIT4 has successfully sold this shared service model to cash conscious governments, such as the Wigan MBC & Greater Manchester Fire Authority in the U.K and several dozen others.

The take away from Grape Escape is that even though the featured customers of the showcased vendors were from disparate vertical areas (engineering services, manufacturing, capital project management, government entities) they are all looking for practical IT solutions that allow them to provide better service that creates a competitive advantage. The vendors showcased at this event are all working with that goal in mind.



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