

TECHNOLOGIES CONVERGE on the SantaCruz Platform

BY MADELEINE MACCAR

IT'S NO SECRET THAT TNCs ARE DISRUPTING AND INDELIBLY CHANGING THE GROUND TRANSPORTATION LANDSCAPE. Legally operating businesses are throwing themselves into a valiant fight but they are understandably struggling to keep up with the new demands of a post-TNC riding public without sacrificing consistently high standards.

As the industry scrambles to rally around technologies that aim to level the playing field and ramp up its on-demand supply, software companies within the chauffeured transportation sector are invaluable allies. When longtime industry vendor GroundWidgets announced its back-office system SantaCruz—a highly customizable fifth-generation platform that streamlines reservation, dispatching, and accounting—in early 2013, it was as a multifaceted answer to what years of experience and feedback had shown that customers want, according to GroundWidgets COO Steve Power.

“When we talk about SantaCruz, we’re talking about a complete, robust system: the reservation, dispatch, and accounting software; the web reservation tool; the mobile booking product; and the mobile chauffeur communication product, as well,” Power explains. “We have a long history of writing this type of software for the industry.”

He also says that the SantaCruz platform was built from the ground up to innovatively integrate Internet, telephony, GPS, safety, cloud computing, and mobile apps, and to form a cohesive and easy-to-use “data analytics engine to help manage businesses in real time.”

Power adds that the hallmark of SantaCruz is its uniqueness and users’ ability to tailor the interface to meet their company’s or clients’ particular needs through a “Windows 8 touch-enabled solution so, for example, a reservation agent can quickly build a reservation using past trip data by uploading those locations directly.” The touch operation is a major component, with open architecture allowing for drag-and-drop functions that help maximize flexibility through configuration and global elements alike.

The system is also intuitive: SantaCruz “learns”

with every trip a chauffeur makes to better predict the time it will take to complete a ride, as well as optimize what trip should be assigned to which chauffeur based on GPS locations and drops-offs—all in the name of cutting down drive time to accommodate more passengers with an existing fleet.

“SantaCruz is constantly looking to improve and shrink the window between pickup and drop-off so a company can do at least one more trip a day,” Power says. “If the average trip is about \$80 per ride and they have a fleet of 50 vehicles, that’s \$4,000 a day. You can do the math in terms of what that might mean to a company over an entire year’s time.”

That learning relies heavily on SantaCruz’s GPS capabilities, which Power cites as the most singularly unique aspect of the software—and the most pervasively linked to “just about everything in the system.” As GPS data are funneled through a chauffeur’s device back to the office, that information is used to automatically calculate rates, pay tolls and parking fees based on geofencing, and update a passenger’s invoice if conditions cause the actual route to deviate from the original one.

One of its features, Universal Locations, is directly integrated with Google, which helps maintain the most accurate navigational maps possible: The system is updated automatically as locations are added or changed. “So when a new restaurant opens in New York City, it is immediately available and easy to find,” Power explains.

Other highlights and features are all based around efficiency. The chauffeur is able to update a trip’s status (both en route and on location), check a flight’s status, and create professional

signage for pickups. As chauffeurs complete their trips throughout the day, auto-dispatch queues the next ride directly into the system based upon the closest available vehicle. And auto-closeout totals the cost of the trip and any unique extra charges (like parking fees and tolls) for the passenger to sign off on their receipt, which is directly charged to their credit card or account.

SantaCruz is constantly evolving and adapting, with the core modules live and functioning and a total of 35 planned as the final goal. Of the 75 companies that have signed up for SantaCruz, roughly half have had the software installed: Power says that the installation is done on a first-come, first-served basis, though GroundWidgets does try to work with clients’ quieter times for minimal disruptions in their workflow.

Ultimately, the system will allow operators an opportunity to diminish the financial advantage TNCs have by not employing a call, dispatch, and accounting staff—an advantage that Power says can put a TNC ahead of a traditional ground transportation service by a margin of 8-12 percent.

“We can help them start reducing those costs and help them compete more effectively,” he says. “Are we going to eliminate that whole 12 percent? No, but we can help them dramatically reduce costs and allow their service and their brand to really shine because that pricing is not going to be a distinguishable item.” **[CD]**

