

# Can I quote you on that?

Software maker launches web-based application to help companies build quotes for large, complex orders

By Nelson Bennett

If your company sells a range of services or products with any degree of complexity, chances are you have a sales team that spends a lot of time just calculating quotes for customers. Likewise for your billing department.

Vancouver's **Deversus Software Inc.** is launching a new web-based quotation and billing system this week called **Socket** that it claims will do the work for you.

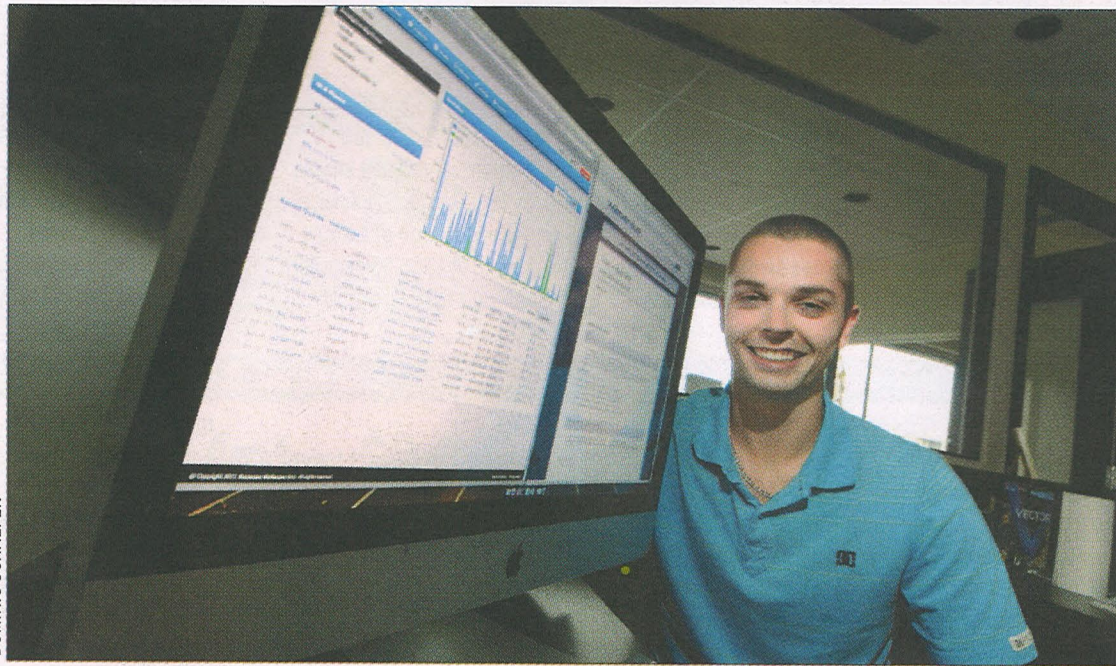
"It's for companies where add-to-cart – traditional e-commerce – just doesn't work," said Deversus co-founder **Mike Polga**.

Until recently, Deversus – a small, four-person software company – specialized in developing custom web-based applications. **Socket** is the first off-the-shelf application the company has designed that will be widely available to any business for a monthly subscription fee ranging from \$29 to \$750.

Twenty-six companies have been testing a pre-release version of **Socket** for months. **Horizon DataSys**, one of the first companies to use it, has been using a beta version of the program for more than two years.

"I've been looking all over for a web-based app where customers and our sales teams could use the same tool to create customized price quotations for customers," said **Horizon DataSys CEO Lyle Patel**.

Horizon sells PC rollback software, which restores computer systems to previous states in the



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event of system failures. Because the company's customers tend to be large organizations placing large, complex orders, coming up with quotes and then billing them was time consuming.

In the past, the company's sales staff spent a lot of time with customers via phone and email creating customized quotations, something that can now be done online, either by the customers themselves, sales staff or both.

"People were either doing it manually or building custom solutions, which is very expensive," said Deversus co-founder **Mike Walsh**. "We basically built a tool that automated quoting online so their customers, or potential customers,

could build their own quotes. Once they have their quote they have the option to buy online."

**"It's for companies where add-to-cart – traditional e-commerce – just doesn't work"**

– Mike Polga, co-founder, Deversus Software

Far from replacing a company's sales staff, the automated quotation system frees those employees up to

spend more time drumming up new accounts, Patel said.

"They can be on the hunt for new clients or be setting up other customers' accounts instead of just doing rudimentary or routine work.

"Because it's web-based, they can create the quote anywhere. So if our sales team needs to create a quotation and they're not in the office, they can do it from any PC that has Internet access."

Applications like **Socket** are part of a wider trend in which large enterprises have been switching from customized in-house e-commerce programs to licensed or subscription programs, according to a white paper by **David Chiu**, an e-com-

merce strategist with Vancouver-based **Elastic Path Software**.

"[T]he number of large enterprises with their own in-house e-commerce applications declined by 24% from 2005 to 2009," Chiu wrote in "The Top 10 Ecommerce Re-platforming Mistakes."

In the past, companies hired software developers to tailor-make applications for their business.

"To build one application, what I call a monolithic application ... to do that from scratch would be prohibitively expensive," Chiu told *Business in Vancouver*.

"Major online sellers, from **Wal-Mart** to **Symantec**, made the switch to licensed software during this period, while not one of the top 200 Internet retailers in North America moved from buy to build," Chiu noted in his white paper.

But the custom-built approach is what Polga and Walsh built Deversus on. The 26-year-old entrepreneurs founded the company in 2007, fresh out of university. The mainstay of their business-to-business enterprise has been designing custom web-based software applications to solve specific problems for clients.

But Walsh concedes that developing software as a service applications and charging licensing or subscription fees may be a more secure approach, because it can be easier to land 1,000 customers paying \$100 each than to land one paying \$100,000 for a custom program.

"For the foreseeable future we're going to continue to do both," Walsh said. "I think the longer-term vision of our company is to go down the route we're going with **Socket**, simply because the market for \$100,000 custom systems isn't that big and it's high risk." ■

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## HIGH-TECH OFFICE

### ALAN ZISMAN

#### *iPad a good travel companion for business or pleasure*

Just got back from several weeks' holiday travels; lucky me.

As many of you do, I take my high-tech office with me, putting a premium on portability and usability. In past years, I've written about travelling with a MacBook Air and with a netbook. This time around, I took a tablet.

While I've recently reviewed tablets from **Motorola** and **RIM** in this column, both of those had already gone back to their manufacturers. Instead, I took my own iPad – not the new iPad 2, but last year's original model.

And I was glad I had it. While both the **Motorola Xoom** and **RIM BlackBerry**

Playbook models I'd had for review (and previous years' MacBook Air and Dell Mini 9 netbook) have Wi-Fi networking, iPad models optionally include 3G networking. It's easy to get the sense that Wi-Fi is readily available – that hasn't been my experience when travelling.

A few moments in a Florence Vodafone storefront in Italy got me an iPad-compatible micro-SIMM good for a month's wireless data access. The cost: EU20.

The account automatically cancelled itself at the end of the month. No muss, no fuss and online access pretty much everywhere – on the train, hiking in the Tuscan

countryside and in the several hotels we stayed at with limited or no Wi-Fi connectivity.

At its best, 3G networking is slower than Wi-Fi, and I never figured out whether there were limits to how much bandwidth my 3G account provided.

As a result, I avoided things like watching online video or downloading apps and updates. But email and everyday web browsing was fine. (Over three weeks, I used about 500 megabytes of data.)

That always-available connectivity also let the iPad double as a GPS, handy both when hiking in rural Tus-

cany and in the medieval maze of cities like Venice. In addition, I had an Android smartphone – without a data plan, the phone's GPS was unable to download and display maps.

The iPad's tablet form factor made it a nice travelling companion – smaller and lighter than a notebook or netbook, easier to use on an airplane seat-back tray table. I easily carried it in my backpack while hiking, something I wouldn't consider doing with a notebook computer.

The tablet screen worked well for watching video (in horizontal landscape mode) and reading books (in vertical portrait mode). Before leaving, I loaded it with movies, TV shows and novels – avoiding any need to pack pounds of paperbacks.

A consortium of B.C. libraries offers eBooks on loan,

downloadable and readable on iPads and other portable devices.

The 10-hour battery life let it remain usable throughout the long flight from Vancouver to Italy, though carry-

#### The 10-hour battery life

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ing any sort of eBook reader means not having anything to read during takeoff and landing. (And yes, even my older iPad continued to really have 10 hours of battery life; I checked usage on the nine-hour Venice-to-Vancouver flight, and it dropped by 10% with every hour of use.)

Instant-on was also a plus, letting the iPad be available as

needed. (It's not really instant-on, but rather, resume from suspend. However, given the iPad's long shelf-life when suspended and little need to be shut down or restarted, that's a technicality.)

I didn't find myself regretting having last year's model. The iPad 2 is thinner and a tiny bit lighter, but my older model is thin and light enough.

The new model has a faster processor and more RAM, but the older model never seemed sluggish. And the current iPad has built-in cameras lacking in mine, but the one time I saw someone using an iPad 2 to take photos it looked pretty clumsy.

More on how I did take photos next time. ■

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