

Abierto Networks boosts convenience store sales

■ *Eliot company deploys digital marketing system*

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ELIOT, Maine — It may seem unlikely that cutting-edge digital marketing technology could find a home in the North American convenience store industry, but don't tell that to the folks at Abierto Networks.

The Eliot-based company is making a big push to merge digital immediacy and consumer buying patterns into a profitable outcome.

Founded in 2005, Abierto Networks specializes in digital marketing solutions and high-speed payment for the convenience store and retail petroleum industry. Co-founder and President Rick Sales said his company originally



RAYA AL-HASHMI PHOTO

Rick Sales is president of Abierto Networks in Eliot, Maine. The company specializes in digital marketing solutions and high-speed payment for the convenience store and retail petroleum industry.

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was focused on an entirely different aspect of the industry when it discovered store owners were really interested in better credit card payment options and how get consumers to buy more in their stores.

"Most of the industry had a very poor IT infrastructure," Sales said. "We found out they weren't interested at all in aggregated data about (gasoline)

line) tank usage and storage. We dropped everything and shifted our focus."

Even that focus has evolved from providing better and more secure payment process to a point of sale digital marketing platform that includes signage and targeted mobile coupon offers and redemption.

"What this (payment processing) product line did was to establish us and give us a window into the industry,"

Sales said.

By 2009, Abierto Networks was dedicated to providing a marketing technology suite of products that Sales said would seek to provide the "holy grail" of consumer marketing for the convenience store industry.

"For ages, owners have been trying to get more customers into the store and for them to buy more higher-margin products," he said.

And the retailers also want-

ed to quantify their return on investment. By 2010, Abierto (which means open in Spanish) had a working prototype and had moved from Exeter to its current location in Maine.

Abierto Networks has 13 employees — a significant jump from only three 2 years ago when the company got its first round of funding, and Sales expects the company to double its staff in the next five years. In February, the company announced it had secured \$505,000 in new financing through company founders, a number of Maine angel investors, the Small Enterprise Growth Fund of Maine and the Maine Technology Institute. The terms of the financing were not disclosed, but Sales said the funding will be used primarily to expand the sales and marketing organization.

As part of that effort, the company hired Carol Hayes, its first business development manager, last month and it will have a particular emphasis on growing its Digital Marketing Platform product suite.

"This funding comes at a great time," Sales said. "Our high-speed payment processing gateways are already in use at over 10,000 industry sites and the new DMP offering has completed a number of pilot trials and is now rolling out on chain-wide implementations. The support we have received from Maine, both through publicly funded organizations and now from private investors, has made all this possible."

Abierto's timing could be just right. Sales said the North American convenience store industry is large, with more than 150,000 locations and more than \$63 billion



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Rick Sales, president of Abierto Networks, stands with his team outside their building in Eliot, Maine.

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AT A GLANCE

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in revenues. The industry is also making major IT infrastructure investments and is moving quickly to embrace mobile marketing technology platforms.

According to a recent technology study by "Convenience Store News," more than 90 percent of chains with 51 or more stores utilize some form of social media, and more than half offer a mobile app to customers. Mobile app messaging grew from 17.2 percent in 2012 to 23.4 percent so far in 2013,

with more than 20 percent of all study respondents reporting plans to introduce the technology this year. Meanwhile, 60 percent of all operators currently offer a loyalty program at their locations.

According to another retail industry study, digital coupon users spend 42 percent more per year at supermarkets than the average shopper, a \$1,029 differential. This trend reflects a 7 percent increase compared to 2011, according to a new report from research firm GfK.

Sales acknowledges there is a sizable segment of the convenience store market of people who are single-minded in their purchases and will just buy gas or that gallon of milk on the way home from work. However, he added, there's a largely untapped market that might be persuaded to take advantage of constantly updated deals. Sales said one eye-opening example happened last month when a convenience store chain in Ohio stocked up and then almost sold out of special offer candles around Mother's Day.