PSM March/April 09

GPS tracking gives dealers an edge over the competition

By David Barnsley

A boon to pool and spa dealers with service trucks, a global positioning system (GPS) offers a vastly improved system for keeping track of company vehicles and employees, cutting fuel costs and increasing the number of service calls per day – resulting in increased profits for the dealer.

How it works

Using information from satellites, a GPS Fleet Tracking System transmits it location via an onboard GPS transceiver securely installed within a service fleet vehicle. This information can then be used to plot real–time information about the vehicle en route to a service call, as well as providing the history of where the vehicle has been.

GPS technology also allows the fleet owner to view information on the vehicle's last service call and automatically view it on their computer; namely where the vehicle went, when it arrived, how long it was there, and when it left. The technology can also track how long the vehicle sat idling and provided an indication about fuel used. This information can then be printed out and saved for future reference, permitting the careful planning and execution of future service trips. This shaves minutes off each appointment, allows for more efficient fuel usage and allows more calls to be made each day.

"If a pool service business can add one more call per day, based on the same overhead costs (vehicle, insurance, manpower), the added revenue will improve the bottom line" says Vince Arone, Vice-President, Business Development for PinPoint GPS Solutions Inc., in Mississauga, Ont., a strategic supplier of GPS technology with clients in the pool and landscaping industries. "This technology helps reduce overtime by allowing the Fleet Manager to review past routes, monitor unnecessary stops to assist drivers to complete their routes within the allotted time."

Jason Dedels of The Gib-San Group, a builder of concrete and vinyl-lined pools in Toronto, says that GPS software has been a tremendous help in their service business.

"It takes quite an effort to maintain costs when managing our fleet of over 60 vehicles, which are all company-owned and operated. GPS technology has made this much easier by measuring and tracking our efforts, allowing us to improve the services we provide."

Now or later

There are two types of systems – a passive system that allows information to be downloaded after the service trucks return to the store and a real time version allowing fleet owners to see where their service trucks are every minute using a map display on the computer screen. This is helpful when the customer wants to know when the service technician will arrive.

The system also allows emergency calls to be handled immediately as the fleet manager can easily determine which the nearest vehicle to the caller's home.

Real time versions of this system allow the fleet manager to immediately check the computer display to locate where each of their vehicles are. If a customer calls to find out the when the service technician will arrive, a real time version of this system allows the fleet manager to check the computer display.

"Reduced dispatching is one of the key benefits of this technology" says Arone. "Fleet managers know where the vehicles are, eliminating the need constantly call the driver to determine their location."

GPS systems also help discourage unauthorized use of service vehicles as well as vehicle theft through 'geofencing,' which allows the user to set "an electronic fence" or geographical limit to any given area on a map. The system can be set up to send an alert by email or text message to the business owner when a service vehicle is near its headquarters or to send an alert when a vehicle enters and leaves a designated site.

Customer relations

In addition to greater safety for the driver, a GPS system also helps when a customer disputes a missed service call or late arrival, as the necessary data is stored on the system for easy retrieval. It can also send customers automated e-mail notification upon the arrival or departure of a system technician from their designated site.

"Providing a faster response to client enquiries is another popular aspect of GPS Fleet Tracking" says Arone. "When a customer calls a company to find out when their service person will arrive, rather than frantically searching for the driver and calling the client back, the Service company can provide a response by a simple click of the mouse on the GPS application site, while the client is still on the line."

"We installed GPS units on all of our construction and service vehicles a couple of years ago and used them to verify the time worked on each job each day," says Ben Tipton of Tipton Builders Inc. in Knoxville, Tenn., a builder of inground vinyl–lined and gunite pools. "The system was hard for some of our people to accept but it made a very dramatic change in the actual time turned in each day by our personnel. It appears to be saving us a lot on money as we always know where each vehicle is and how long it has been there."

Tipton says the system also helps his company when one of his their service trucks is involved in an accident.

"If someone calls us and says something fell off one of our trucks and broke their windshield, we can check through GPS where all our trucks were at the time of the accident and show our truck wasn't involved. This has happened a few times."

Tipton also says a GPS system allows him to reconcile the time indicated on service work orders with the time the GPS system indicates the service truck was at the site.

"Should the customer call and complain about a service technician not being at their pool for the time they are being billed, we can send them a copy of the GPS statement, which ensures the time charged is accurate and also makes the service technician aware their time is being checked."

GPS technology also helps pool construction companies keep on schedule, says Tipton.

"On construction sites, we use a very thorough cost breakdown with the estimated time for each project. With a GPS system, we can track the job time to make sure it matches the time turned in by the supervisor before we enter actual time on our spreadsheet. This helps us see if we are over or under on the estimated time versus actual time. If we are over on time, we determine why and this makes our future estimates more accurate."