

Equity taps CRM for tracking condo sales

NATIONAL PROPERTY MANAGER TRACKS CONDO SALES WITH CRM SYSTEM FROM MICROSOFT

By Joseph C. Panettieri

EQUITY RESIDENTIAL DOESN'T OWN BOARDWALK OR Park Place, but if it were playing Monopoly, the Chicago-based company would manage much of the surrounding prime real estate.

So when the company, which manages more than 1,000 prime properties across 35 states, decided last year to convert several of its apartment buildings into condominiums, it made sense, especially considering the real estate boom at the time.

But Equity Residential realized fairly quickly that the condo sales strategy wouldn't pass "Go" without a new IT system in place.

The company had used Microsoft Corp.'s Excel to track condo sales, pricing and reporting and Microsoft Word as the foundation for documents, but there was no central means for culling and analyzing cumulative sales data.

What the \$1.8 billion property management company needed was a new CRM (customer relationship management) system that could handle functions such as tracking condo sales leads and identifying which marketing tactics were generating the best leads; monitoring the

entire sales cycle for each condo unit; streamlining the documentation and paperwork required for sales closings; and tracking the inventory status of each condo unit (sold, pending and so on).

Equity Residential reached out to local solutions providers, seeking an IT partner that could design such a system using Microsoft CRM, the software company's fledgling package for midsize businesses. However, two solutions providers tried—and failed.

Then came Sonoma Partners LLC, a Chicago-based solutions provider that designs IT systems

for small and midsize customers, typically those with 25 to 500 employees. In addition to serving the real estate sector, Sonoma's vertical-market focus includes manufacturing, health and personal care, and professional sports.

"We found Sonoma by doing a Web search," said Anne Baker, a product manager at Equity Residential. "We were looking



Sonoma's Snyder: MS CRM offers "core functionality."

for information about a specific CRM function. Sonoma's Web site had the best explanation, and we signed up for their CRM newsletter."

Impressed, Equity Residential asked in June if Sonoma could get the company's CRM project back on track. Very familiar with Microsoft CRM, Sonoma agreed to tackle the project and designed a fully functional system in seven weeks.

Most solutions providers are only now kicking Microsoft CRM's tires, but Sonoma has been a driving force behind the product

since its beta tests in 2002.

"We have extensive experience designing proprietary Web-based customer management software using Microsoft .Net," said Mike Snyder, principal of Sonoma. "Microsoft CRM allows us to give our customers the core functionality they require, and we can extend the solution with open-software APIs and our own development experience."

That's exactly what Equity Residential needed. Although Microsoft CRM has extensive out-of-the-box functionality, it also required custom extensions from Sonoma. On the upside, Microsoft CRM has built-in Lead, Contact and Opportunity features. When a prospective buyer expresses interest in a condo, an Equity Residential salesperson enters the information into the CRM system as a Lead. If the Lead decides to purchase a condo, the CRM system converts him or her into a Contact with an associated Opportunity record—which tracks the buyer's name, unit num-

ber, closing date, down payment and so on.

Still, Microsoft CRM could not remove a product (in this case, a condo) from inventory once it was sold. "Tracking the inventory of each condo was critical," said Snyder. "Equity's salespeople had to know which units were available, pending and sold in real time."

Moreover, the CRM system had to account for specific differences among the condos. Buyers had 25 to 30 "upgrade" options for each condo, such as tile, plumbing and kitchen countertops. Further complicating matters, upgrade prices varied from condo to condo. For instance, a tile upgrade in a one-bedroom unit may differ in price from a tile upgrade in a two-bedroom unit.

Sonoma therefore created a separate SQL Server database, which tracks and manages the nuances of each condo sale. Equity Residential users view information from Microsoft CRM and SQL Server

as if it were culled from a single database.

Sonoma's strategy isn't unique. Predictably, many solutions providers are tying Microsoft CRM to other Microsoft server applications. "One of Microsoft CRM's great strengths is its ability to leverage classic technology such as SQL Server, Exchange Server and BizTalk Server," said Eileen Stribula, a Microsoft CRM consultant at Tectura Corp., a solutions provider in Tempe, Ariz. "It's attractive to companies that seek integrated functionality."

Although Microsoft CRM has received mixed reviews from the press, sales appear to be picking up. "Microsoft expects to double last year's [CRM] customer number by June of this year," said Stribula. "We expect our customer base to follow that trend."

Microsoft CRM is particularly attractive to businesses that are seeking rapid application deployments. Sonoma, for instance, completed

the initial rollout for Equity Residential in a scant seven weeks. Active since August, the first rollout spans roughly 20 desktops and manages one property involving 700 condo units.


Through additional enhancements, Sonoma empowered Equity Residential's sales agents to quickly generate purchasing agreements, closing worksheets, tax letters, warrantee deeds, paid assessment letters, bills of sale and titles. Software from ActivePDF Inc., of Mission Viejo, Calif., works hand in hand with Microsoft CRM and manages the document generation. "The instant creation of these documents eliminates errors and saves hours of time for each condo unit sold," said Snyder.

Satisfied with the current rollout, Equity Residential has big CRM plans for the future. By next year, the CRM system will manage more than 10,000 condo units across 50 property loca-

tions, according to Baker.

Rather than depending on Sonoma for the large-scale rollout, the solutions provider trained Equity Residential's internal development staff to manage the system.

Sonoma makes Microsoft CRM sound like an easy sale. Yet two other solutions providers tried—and failed—to deploy such a system for the real estate company. "Sonoma Partners displayed a solid understanding of the product and were quick to comprehend our business needs," said Baker. "We talked to other integration firms, but Sonoma had the best solution for the functionality we needed. We consider them a trusted adviser."

Sounds like Equity Residential is ready to pass "Go." 

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