



Homing in on growth

O'Dwyer upgrades software to keep pace with homebuilding success

As the controller for Atlanta-based homebuilder O'Dwyer Homes, Cheryl Mertz has managed the numbers behind a remarkable run of growth. When Mertz joined the firm eight years ago, O'Dwyer was building 70 homes each year. In 2006, the firm will put up 230 homes.

At first, Mertz tried to keep pace with the software she inherited, CFO for Homebuilders. A year later she upgraded to a Windows-based product called Millennium. As O'Dwyer built more homes, Mertz and her colleagues loaded more purchasing data into Millennium. Before long, however, the software was stretched beyond capacity and it had slowed to a crawl. When Mertz sought help from the manufacturer, none was forthcoming. That's when she knew it was time to move on.

"I didn't see a future for Millennium," she says. "We were growing and I needed to add some features. But there were very few upgrades and practically no technical support."

Mertz attended a homebuilders' show in Atlanta, where she sized up various software suppliers. Among them was Randy Collins, president of a local firm called Strategies Group. Impressed by Collins, she invited him and two other companies to present to Dan O'Dwyer, the company's owner. Afterward, Mertz narrowed her choices to Strategies Group and another firm. Upon doing some research into the financial stability of each, she opted to go with Strategies Group.

O'Dwyer purchased the Accounts Payable, General Ledger and Job Cost modules from Timberline's Gold Package, along with its Estimating module. They also bought BuilderMT's purchase order system, which they planned to use in conjunction with the Timberline modules.

As implementation neared, Mertz reflected on her wide range of experiences in making several software conversions over her 23 years in accounting. While she felt some angst about moving what would be a mountain of data, she soon saw that she had nothing to fear. Under the lead of Strategies Group consultant Jenny Evans, all data was converted flawlessly from the Millennium software to Timberline.

"It was the smoothest implementation I have experienced in my career," Mertz says. "The Strategies Group team was great. They knew our business and our needs, and they knew exactly what they were doing."

Eager to break in the new software, Mertz started with the Report Designer & Financial Statement Designer modules. She found she could create a report and customize it however she saw fit. That may not sound revolutionary, but under Millennium her only option had been to use canned reports. Mertz uses these reports to track budget, costs and variances on individual homebuilding projects. With Timberline, she learned that she could also incorporate purchase orders for each job. Now Mertz is able to run one report that shows the status of every job, right down to each purchase order issued with paid/open status indicated.

“To create a report like that in the past, I would have had to run five separate reports and cobble the information together,” she says.

Mertz has made similar headway in accounts payable. Before Timberline, she had to enter every invoice and job cost by hand. Now she simply checks a box in the Builder MT purchase order system and the information she needs flows automatically into Timberline.

“It used to take us four to six days to process all invoices for a 15-day pay period,” Mertz observes. “Just as we finished one batch, it would almost be time to start the next one. Now we can do them all in one day.”

When it comes to estimating, O’Dwyer has managed to achieve similar efficiencies. Before Timberline, the firm would estimate costs on each home on an Excel spreadsheet. That spreadsheet would then constitute the budget. When a customer wanted to make changes, those changes would have to be made by hand.

“The process itself was so cumbersome that it discouraged people from making changes to the original budget,” Mertz comments.

With the Timberline Estimating module, O’Dwyer has created templates for each of its 15 home plans, as well as an inventory of every optional feature. The templates even account for cost differences by geographic location. It used to take up to a full day to estimate a job; now it takes 10 minutes.

“We can customize down to the smallest detail on Timberline, which has made it so much easier to estimate projects,” Mertz says.

Mertz thinks so highly of Timberline that she has gone out of her way to promote the product to homebuilders in other regions who are thinking about buying the software. In the last few years she has welcomed in companies from Alabama and southeast Georgia, showing their finance teams exactly how she uses Timberline to manage the number behind their thriving business.

“Timberline is a great piece of software,” she comments. “It has been an enormous boost to our business, and that’s why I am glad to help others learn about it.”

Mertz is equally bullish on her relationship with Strategies Group.

“Strategies Group is extremely responsive to our needs,” she says. “I have never had this kind of technical service and support. They are the best.”

