Keeping Your Calendar

The latest management software gives worship facilities managers extra tech power, saving time and money

by Sibley Fleming

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Worship facilities have one big thing in common with beehives—both are abuzz with numerous and constant activities and functions. Today, the many tasks—from scheduling a Wednesday night supper to maintaining an HVAC system or even to tracking utility bills—can be efficiently managed by a number of easy-to-use, cost effective software tools and services.

ServiceU, a software service provider based in Cordova, Tenn., a suburb of Memphis, for instance, offers a product called EventU, which is a Web-based system for church facility and event scheduling. "EventU gives a church one single calendar for internal and public events," says Tim Whitehorn, founder and CEO of ServiceU, who adds, in most cases, churches still keep two separate calendars.

What makes EventU unique, according to Whitehorn, is the product's distributed approval process. Via an email component, it routes requests so that any person on the staff can key in an event and see the availability of rooms. This eliminates paperwork and phone calls by routing all requests electronically.

"Church scheduling is one of the most complex of any industry," he says. "Hotels [and] convention facilities are much more straightforward because they're centralized." In a real life scenario, if the youth minister decides he wants to schedule an event three Saturday nights from now, he has to ask for food service, audio visuals, maybe some kind of security or a bus to go off site. Each of those needs is basically a request to others on the church staff.

With EventU, every detail of the scheduling, both requests and approvals, are handled over the Web.

"Customers use 'accountability' to describe the system, meaning it's always known who did what," says Whitehorn. EventU is priced at $54.95 per month and escalates based on how many resources and users a church opts to set up in the system.

A new addition to EventU, rolled out this summer, is EventU Green. This product is specifically designed for HVAC and is an automation tool that integrates a church's schedule with other types of control systems.

"We've had churches ask us about lights as well as other types of controls," recalls Whitehorn. "We've got to start somewhere, and we started with where churches get the most bang for their buck, and that's their utility bill."

With EventU Green, a facility manager can control the HVAC over the Internet in virtual real time. The classic case is when the facilities manager gets a late-night call from the pastor, who forgot to mention an event that he'd planned for the next morning. What it means for the facilities manager is that a room may need to be heated or cooled prior to its use.

"And so with this if you have EventU Green, log into EventU on the Web, put the event in, and it automatically integrates into your HVAC system," explains Whitehorn. "The correct zones will turn on and off at the proper times based on your actual schedule of events."

Green Management Flourishes
Other companies are also addressing stewardship of the environment. Chicago-based FacilityTree is a 100% Web-centered, fully integrated software service that tracks and manages assets, work orders, preventive maintenance procedures, inventory, space management and scheduling. In short, the software service tracks and manages everything that is purchased by a church or building owner—from tables and chairs to windows and steeples.

The company recently developed an environmental component—GreenTree. GreenTree allows facilities managers to track carbon footprint components such as HVAC. A manager can see how the footprint diminishes over time as the church employs better environmental practices, such as installing a more efficient HVAC system or insulating the exterior building envelop.

Like FacilityTree, GreenTree includes facility condition assessment and preventive maintenance components that allow facility managers to plan future capital expenditures as assets must be replaced when they've reached the extent of their usefulness. As a management tool, the user can then make green purchasing decisions when replacing carpet or urinals or even window panes.

GreenTree is a fully integrated component of FacilityTree, and cost is calculated based on the size of the size of a church's facilities.

"Green Tree was developed first and foremost … not about saving money, but about being good stewards of the environment," says Paul Claybaker, a consultant for FacilityTree. Given fewer energy resources, responsible stewardship takes on even greater importance with many congregations.

At what point is it cost effective for a church to consider a software or technology solution? "It almost always comes down to two key things—work requests and preventive maintenance," says Claybaker. He offers this rule of thumb: When a facility begins to require 10-15 work requests or preventive maintenance tasks requests per week, technology will likely save time and money.

What Size Fits?
CWorks Systems offers several maintenance software and facility management solutions. The products include CareWorks, which is Web-based. CareWorks is particularly suitable for smaller churches in that the software and data resides on CWorks' secure servers and is managed by their professional staff.

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Dave Griffiths, senior management consultant, CWorks Systems, Williamsville, NY

Tim Whitehorn founder & CEO, ServiceU, Cordova, TN

For $60 per month, according to Dave Griffiths, a senior management consultant with CWorks Systems based in Williamsville, N.Y., small churches can manage assets, work orders, preventive maintenance and materials. It also allows the user to access the data anywhere and anytime through the Internet.

Technology is also serving to improve the way worship facilities managers protect assets in the event of a fire or other emergency. For instance, Notifier is the manufacturer or company that designs multiple types of fire alarm systems, from smaller conventional systems and large addressable systems up to mass notification systems and large-scale networked systems covering multiple, remote locations.

"Notifier's intelligent, addressable fire alarm control systems are best suited for church facilities of any size," says Jason Kneen, communications manager for the company. "For smaller facilities there is the NFS-320; for mid-size facilities there is the NFS2-640; and for large facilities there is the NFS2-3030. All three systems use the same line(s) of smoke detectors, pull stations, and audiovisual notification devices, and offer optional plug-and-play or integrated voice evacuation systems."

It Takes a Community
While facilities management software solutions can help to manage and track maintenance, assets and scheduling, the future of such technology may in fact be a refinement of existing tools.

"We believe that the future of church management will move more and more towards a community-centric approach," says Steve Caton, vice president of sales and marketing for Colorado Springs, Colo.-based Church Community Builder, which offers Web-based church management software. "Already, many providers in the church management space are pushing to create better communication tools and improve social interaction within their products. When this is done effectively, the local church is able to both manage information that is critical to the ministry while also tightening community and increasing passion and commitment to the vision."

Church Community Builder (CCB) offers a Web-based solution to both calendaring and facilities management. What makes CCB unique is that it has always focused its church management solutions on everyone in the church, including the people in the pews, says Caton.

Each group of people within the church community, including staff, small groups, children's ministry, missions, worship and volunteers, has access to its own private calendar. Those with the appropriate privileges can schedule events, request and/or book resources, send invitations and manage responses. Those that are invited can respond to the invitation online, make comments and add guests similar to the e-vite process.

"Almost every other church management solution is designed to be used primarily by church staff and selected leadership," says Caton. CCB chose to take a social networking approach to the equation that provides the church with a distinct opportunity to facilitate important management functions while also assessing the overall involvement and interaction of its body.

Sibley Fleming is an Atlanta writer and author of several books including How to Rock Your Baby. She has been named Georgia Author of the Year and has been recognized for outstanding writing by the National League of American Pen Women.