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Installations to Go

InstallCard enables mobile installers to pick up business from non-installing retailers

<BY ERIK CAPLAN>

Consumers who are interested in mobile electronics usually have three installation options.

They could take a trip to a congested big-box retailer. They could patronize an unknown independent installer. Or they could open door number three, which entails picking up a screwdriver and taking a whack at it themselves—an option that could end in disaster for the mechanically challenged.

On the other side of the sales equation, some electronics retailers—both large chains and small businesses—have trouble selling 12-volt mobile electronics if they don't have an installation department.

InstallCard, a program developed by Haverhill, Mass.-based mobile services company MobileToys, offers a potential solution to these issues.

Essentially, InstallCard is a sort of "gift card" for the installation of various mobile electronics products. It is either bundled with the purchase of a product or sold separately.

When a customer buys a card for, say, the installation of a satellite radio, he or she takes the card home and registers information about the job (type of vehicle and type of install needed) online. The customer then receives a list of InstallCard-networked installers in the area, who, in turn, are furnished with the customer's information. The customer simply chooses an installer and takes in the vehicle for the work at a convenient time.

Clearly, this product represents a new way of looking at mobile installations for all parties involved, including manufacturers.

"Manufacturers want to sell their products wherever they can," says Frank Cantele, vice president of marketing at MobileToys. "They're looking for new channels, but some of these channels need installers. At the same time, local installers need business. We act as the medium, handling the customer from start to end. We provide a certified connection between customers, retailers, manufacturers and installers."

Using the InstallCard program, both brick-and-mortar retailers and internet-based e-tailers can bundle the appropriate card with their products, allowing them to offer installation for mobile products without handling installation in-house.

"Retailers can contact us for information about offering InstallCard," Cantele explains. "They can start with an open order for cards, which is 50, cards, and we give them payment terms on that first order. After that, they can buy cards on a consignment basis."

Cantele claims InstallCard has been a great boon to retailers looking for ways to bump up sales in product categories where they had previously,

been lagging due to a lack of installation services.

"Some retailers are bundling InstallCard with more complex products like GPS systems and mobile video," he says. "They're calling us to say how happy they are because they're selling the product as well as the InstallCard. Satellite radio is another big seller right now, and some of the retailers who sell them now display InstallCard right next to the satellite radios as an add-on."

The appeal of InstallCard is not limited to retailers and manufacturers. Customers seem to like the idea of installing their purchases at their leisure.

"We're finding that our customers don't always run right out to have their products installed right away," Cantele says. "Some of them wait a week or two. That's one of the benefits of our service—they can handle the installation on their own terms."

Mobile Electronics Certification Professional (MECP) installers can participate in the program for free. They can register to be part of the InstallCard network online, which then helps drive business in their direction. "Our bread-and-butter people are the 12-volt installers who are competing with big-box stores," Cantele says.

Naturally, once the customer is in the installer's store, the door is open for the installer to attach additional sales.

"We tell installers that they have to do the install that was commissioned first," Cantele says. "Then, if they want to offer the customer something else in addition, they most certainly can."

Of course, even a well-designed product like InstallCard can run into a roadblock from time to time.

For example, due to vehicle issues, the cost of some installation jobs may exceed the amount allowed by the

InstallCard. Cantele says the service takes this possibility into account and takes precautions to ensure this happens infrequently.

"Installers in our network will know all about the vehicle in advance," he says. "If it looks like there will be an additional cost for the job, they tell the customer, and then the customer has the option to either pay the extra amount, return the card or we can talk to them about it. We've done more than 50,000 installs, and we haven't had many problems at all. We're a customer-centric business, and we aim to make sure they're satisfied."

Cantele says future prospects for InstallCard may eventually include home theater jobs as well.

"We've been asked about that [home theater installs] a great deal, and, once we feel we've got our arms fully around mobile installation, we'll be looking in that direction," he says. **CR**



The InstallCard web site directs retail customers to qualified area installers.