

only about 10% generate orders from their POS system. The most common model for single stores and small networks in convenience is a separate inventory and ordering process.

"The main advantages of an electronic system are speed and accuracy," says Mike Martyn. "It allows us to shift our focus from taking an order to understanding and driving sales. We have used the time saved to contact retailers to tell them what's available and offer alternatives. They were pleasantly surprised when someone took an interest in their order."

Electronic invoicing

For some retailers, electronic invoicing is a reality, as in the Metcash model and through the Quatro system.

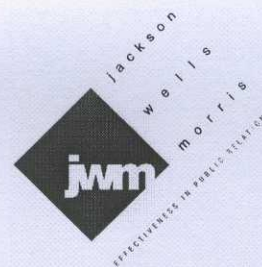
"The retailer's POS and the supplier need to be 'invoice-integrated' to Quatro," says Dave Levine. "Both are simple processes in the Quatro model."

For some, the invoice is the last hold on paper in the process. Electronic payment is also becoming a reality with most systems.

However, no ordering system can be fully electronic from inventory to payment and not all products suit this style of ordering. For example, there is no point in ordering milk electronically, and we have not yet found a machine that can check if your order has arrived as ordered, put it on the shelf for you and update your inventory.

Even if you use hand-held laser technology to record the delivered boxes, how do you know the box contains what it says it contains? No matter how integrated your system, you still need to check that order and stack in on the shelves.

The Mobil network uses Breeze for POS and back office systems to generate orders, and is linked to e-Orders and Quatro to place electronic orders.



"The orders are generated at each site then sent to head office for checking," says David Evans, Managing Director, Priority One Management P/L, Mobil. "But, the order is still checked manually. We could use a hand-held scanner but sometimes the bar code on the outside of the box is not the same as the contents. We still have to open the box and check the code and the quantity. When the order is generated it sits in the system till the quantities are keyed in."

Peter Friday, who manages the 10 MSF sites for BP in Brisbane's western suburbs, agrees. "Ordering is getting sophisticated but delivery is still old-fashioned."

The future is up to you

Systems providers agree that the future is about customisation for both supplier and retailer. Systems will be increasingly personalised to suit you. You can already receive important information about specials and promotions from suppliers. Recent enhancements for Quatro and e-Orders means that

the web pages look like that of the suppliers.

In Quatro's more recent release, the SMS alert feature includes regular notification of up-sell, cross-sell or substitution promotion opportunities.

"Retailers can be constantly aware of specials and the latest product news," says Dave Levine.

The next step will be systems that generate reports that tell you how well different products perform in your store. You will be able to share that information with your suppliers.

"A lot of valuable data is generated by the systems," says David Evans. "We could collect the data to generate rebate and points systems as a marketing tool."

"e-trading is only limited by the imagination," says Gary McCall.

"The question is, 'Is it useful in the marketplace and is it practical?' If there is a call for it and it makes common sense then it can be done." ■