“Out-of-the-box” automation helps Suburban Propane manage rapid growth

When the AP department at Suburban Propane was suddenly faced with the challenge of managing twice their invoice volume, Corcentric helped them ramp up quickly without spending a fortune on staffing.

ABOUT SUBURBAN PROPANE
Suburban Propane Partners LP is a publicly traded Master Limited Partnership listed on the New York Stock Exchange. Headquartered in Whippany, New Jersey, Suburban has been in the customer service business since 1928. The company serves the energy needs of more than 1.2 million residential, commercial, industrial, and agricultural customers in 41 states through more than 710 locations.

THE PROBLEM
The AP department at Suburban Propane has a lot of complexity to deal with at the best of times. With a network of nearly 200 customer service centers requiring regional approvals for larger expenses, AP was managing approvals and data entry for thousands of invoices each month.

While the company had created a “check request system” that enabled each center to enter recurring expenses for smaller amounts directly into the AP system, the majority of those invoices had to be mailed to one of several regional offices. It was a slow and often unreliable process.

“Our previous system was very manual; at times we would encounter delays in obtaining the approvals required to process invoices,” says Helene Fischer, Assistant VP – Accounting Operations.

“It has the power and flexibility to take you wherever you want to go.”

But when Suburban Propane bought the propane division of Inergy LP in August 2012, the acquisition turned Suburban into the third-largest U.S. propane distributor by volume and the number of invoices instantly doubled.
To scale responsibly, Fischer had to quickly find and implement an automated workflow solution that would enable her to manage the volume without doubling her staff.

THE SOLUTION
While time was of the essence, Fischer still needed a solution that met a long list of requirements.

The company required a flexible, automated workflow capable of handling their complex, multi-step approval process while allowing invoices to be accepted via regular mail, fax, or email submissions. Other must-haves included a vendor portal that allowed vendors to check invoice status, a 10-year invoice retention period, the capacity to add a customer portal, and built-in functionality that could replace their existing check-request system.

In addition to the long list of features, the system needed to be easy to use.

“Our customer service reps are incredibly busy, and I had to find the easiest solution for them,” Fischer explains. “They have customers walking in with payments, telephones ringing off the hook, and deliveries that need to be routed. I needed something that was visibly the easiest to look at and handle.”

When Fischer and the selection committee evaluated their options, COR360 emerged as the clear winner. Not only did it meet their requirements, but it enabled them to get up to speed faster than any other solution they evaluated.

“We were looking at other options, but they weren’t “out-of-the-box” solutions. Everything had to be customized from the ground up,” Fischer explains.

“People go out of their way to stop by and tell me that this was a win-win.”

In the meantime, the AP Department was maxed out, even with the addition of 10 temporary employees. They were putting in long hours, and overtime costs were mounting steadily.

“I didn’t have a year and a half for someone to customize a solution,” she says. “Corcentric was amazing: we got up and running in about 75 days, and we got exactly what we wanted.”
RESULTS
To date, Suburban's experience using COR360 has been very positive. All the company's expense payables are processed through the system—between 16,000 and 24,000 documents per month. Yet Fischer was not only able to eliminate the 10 temporary staff members the company hired during the expansion period; she was also able to reduce her core staff by 25 percent.

Not only was COR360 capable of meeting the company's initial requirements; it also helped them meet new challenges along the way. For example, Corcentric simplified monthly tax payments by replacing a tedious manual process with a custom program that automatically extracts the required data from tax spreadsheets and uploads it to the system. This saved Fischer's department hours of labor and achieved a 94 percent accuracy rate within two months of deployment.

“It just has that power and flexibility to take you wherever you want to go,” says Fischer. “None of the other systems we looked at really had that.”

Best of all, people are using COR360 and loving it. While choosing to automate was a leap of faith, Fischer says everything has worked out better than she could have hoped.

“The feedback I’ve gotten from everyone, including our Executive team, has been great,” says Fischer. People go out of their way to stop by and tell me that this was a win-win.”

For more information or to schedule a demo, call 888.525.7677.