



DIY Laser Scanning...Really?

Who Needs a Service Provider?

So, you've got this all figured out. You've seen the laser scanning technology demonstrated and may even have used the technology yourself successfully. In an effort to control your own destiny and save money, you're ready to take the next step and buy your own scanner. Why not, how hard can this be? The world is moving to 3D, you're a visionary, and it's time to rocket your company into the future. But before you light the fuse and make the investment—both capital and human, there are some things you may want to consider.

Show me the Money!

There are some simple economic reasons service providers exist...and always will. Many businesses cannot predict with any reliability their short term or long term cash flow. By their nature as a contractor, engineer, surveyor or architect their business is cyclical. Other more traditional brick and mortar companies with factories and plants cannot accurately forecast their investment budgets beyond the current fiscal year. And still other businesses are at the whim of the executive leadership whose appetite for new technology is 'um...how shall we say, schizophrenic?

Regardless of your target market can you really afford to make the investment in laser scanning knowing that your potential customers cannot predict their need for your services? Here's a little secret—it takes time and perseverance to integrate laser

scanning technology. The instrument manufacturers, software providers and guys like me who are service providers want you to use our products and services and we'll always make it seem easier than it is. But it's not.

“...in the end it is not about the technology, it is about the people.”

Shallow Labor Pool

The true cost of building a scanning/modeling business is in finding the competent personnel who first understand how to properly collect the data. Then you have to have others with a different skill set who understand how to create the 3D deliverables. These are not the same people, and there isn't really a school or university that spits out these graduates.

Forget how inexpensive it is to buy a scanner or software... think about the challenge of finding and retaining the right people who can scan and process the data. Where will you find them? Or more importantly, how will know they're any good? Most of us who make the hiring decisions really have no idea if a person can really model. From personal

experience, I can assure you it's a gamble. And if you're wrong, you just spent a lot of time and money learning that lesson.

Furthermore, these trained professionals need to have continual training in order to remain on the cutting edge and stay masters of their skills. To not invest in continuing education with your modelers is a collision course with disaster, and it will eventually make them obsolete. So the real cost of building a laser scanning business is not in the hardware and software it is in finding the right people.

What Can Go Wrong?

Each time your company completes a project there is an inherent risk associated with it. In the scanning and modeling world, the risk is substantial because you are typically providing data that not only affects your performance, but others around you. After all, scanning and modeling is all about measurement. So if you measured wrong...who else will this affect? How much will it impact them? And how good is your attorney?

Have a Plan

Typically the scope of the laser scanning effort is different on each project since no two are really the same. As the deliverable changes, your final product might be somewhat of a moving target. Be ready to have diversification in your processes. A competent scanning provider should be good at taking raw data and delivering multiple end products in order to achieve the project's goals.

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Lurking Around the Corner...

There are plenty of hidden costs you should be aware of if you're going to bolt on a scanning/modeling business. One of the most obvious is the cost of the software to convert the data into a usable deliverable. And many times it takes multiple software packages to get the desired end product. None of these processing packages are inexpensive and they'll all require continual updates. This means more money out of your pocket.

Another hidden cost is in the annual calibration of your scanner. These calibrations can take as long as two months and cost up to \$18k. So when you purchase your scanner, make sure you can afford to be without it for an extended period of time, and that you've budgeted for these extra costs.

Crystal Ball Says

With scanners becoming more affordable it is easier for firms to enter the 3D scanning/modeling business, either as a startup, or as a bolt on to existing services. The technology has been proven to work. It results in significant cost savings. With more firms educating potential customers about the benefits of 3D laser scanning the demand is sure to increase for this technology.

This is great news for instrument retailers, software vendors and service providers, but in the end it is not about technology, it is about people. ■

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