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EXCLUSIVE REPORTS

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Autovia accelerates

Internet startup gets toehold in Europe

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[Autovia](#), the Sacramento Internet start-up that links auto shops and parts distributors, continues to pick up speed.

It has recently:

- | Added 10 major new manufacturer catalogs to its online database.
- | Tripled the speed of its software application.
- | Opened an office in Romania, as part of a plan to pursue the European car parts market later this year.

Autovia already had 4,500 product lines, and the new catalogs represent thousands of parts more.

In the Romanian office, 45 employees are typing in code and text for Autovia's catalogs and software here and in Europe.

The Romanian connection will come in handy for the European push. One reason is that the company has found employees who can write in the eight languages, plus English, needed to do business in the European market.

Autovia employs 100 people in South Sacramento. So far, it has signed 500 U.S. shops in its target markets of San Jose, Philadelphia and Chicago, in addition to its original beta market of Sacramento.

The company hopes to be in the nation's top eight markets by the end of the year, adding Minneapolis, Los Angeles and Baltimore, among others.

Stymied by slow data lines: The roll-out is continuing on schedule but it has hit some logistical snags, said Rod Georgiu, Autovia's president and chief executive.

The problem is a longer than expected wait for garages trying to get digital subscriber line (DSL), a fast Internet service.

Only about 20 percent of auto garages have DSL, and it can take 90 days for a garage to get it from their local Internet provider.

"I'm sure everything in the future will be easier, but we're not there yet," Georgiu said. "We've been rolling out now for eight months and we are still working very hard. But we still don't have any competitors yet, so that is good."

Once a garage is connected to Autovia, however, things start moving fast.

"They've made it a lot quicker, and they've taken a few steps out of it," said Howard Shannon, parts manager of Car Care Center, a garage on Fulton Avenue that was one of the beta tests for Autovia last year.

"We use it quite a bit here. It's just faster and it comes in real handy. I'm not stuck on hold on the phone forever, so I can do a lot more work more quickly," Shannon said. "I'm multi-tasking now instead of being stuck on hold all the time."

Autovia's system isn't saving the shop money on parts, he said -- it's increasing efficiency by allowing the shop to do more business.

"The faster the tech gets the parts, the faster he can finish," Shannon said. "The faster the tech gets the job done, the more jobs you can do."

The system has "significantly improved" production and customer service, said Sam Cracraft, owner of Sacramento TBA. It's a local distributor with two locations. Cracraft said his business has saved time and money too.

Sales per shop double: Autovia's parts ordering system lets auto and truck shops see their existing distributors' inventory and price over the Internet, then order a part online.

What can be done on Autovia in a minute may take a few minutes each by telephone for all of a shop's main parts suppliers.

"It all comes down to speed," Shannon said. "Everybody hates having their car down."

Since March, sales per shop have doubled, Georgiu said, adding that as people get more familiar and comfortable with the system, they use it more.

Autovia's latest software upgrade has made the system easier to use, and eliminated a few mouse-clicks in ordering.

"We've just started with the 2.6 software, which includes a lot of new functionality. (They're) things the customers have asked for," Georgiu said, and they have cut the time for parts checks from 45 seconds to 15 seconds.

Someday, Autovia may pursue the niche market of hunting down hard-to-find parts across the country.

But the immediate plan is still to help local garages get parts from their local distributors quickly.


Autovia has mostly after-market parts manufacturers in its database, but it is trying to get original equipment manufacturers online, especially for the European push, Georgiu said.

"In the United States, it's 23 percent of people go to the dealer for service. In Europe, it's 50 percent to the dealer," he said. "So we are talking with the original equipment manufacturers."

Big backers: Autovia's rollout this year has been fueled by \$32 million in venture capital contributed by Hearst Corp., Internet Capital Group Inc., Crosspoint Ventures and Sacramento's Hallador Venture Partners.

Georgiu, a native of Romania, walked out from behind the Iron Curtain in 1971, eventually ending in the United States. He started ALLTest, an automotive diagnostic test computer company in 1974, and sold it in 1986 for \$5 million.

Then he started Alldata Corp. in Elk Grove, which he built into a national clearinghouse of up-to-date technical briefs. He sold it in 1998 for \$56 million.

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