MAKING ETHERNET AND SERIAL WORK TOGETHER

NetPort adaptor helps Dione plc effortlessly connect serial Point of Sale terminals with Ethernet back office systems

It may not look like much from the outside, but *NetPort*, from Alpha Micro Components Ltd, is a real box of tricks. Its core function is as a 'plug-and-play' Serial-to-Ethernet adaptor, allowing any machine with a Serial port to become Ethernet and Internet-enabled in an instant. But Alpha Micro has built a well-earned reputation for taking its designs one step further, and NetPort is no different. With an embedded web server, NetPort can be contacted and monitored via any standard web browser, opening up endless remote monitoring opportunities.

"The potential applications for NetPort are endless," explains Christos Papakyriacou, Managing Director, Alpha Micro. "As new vertical markets become aware of the product, new opportunities keep presenting themselves. NetPort is offering many companies a simple but effective answer to a variety of questions."

An Xtremely Good Solution

One such company is Dione plc, a highly respected manufacturer of Electronic Funds Transfer (EFTPoS) terminals. Dione recently launched its new PIN pad, the *Xtreme,* providing retailers with a cost-effective route to fulfilling the requirements laid down by the new EMV Standard*.

On the communications front, the PIN pad module has been designed with the industry-standard RS232 Asynchronous Serial port, allowing easy connection to the Xtreme terminal itself. "Although this meets the requirements of 90% of our customers," explains Ricky Garrido, Chief Technical Officer at Dione, "some of our larger retail clients want to connect the PIN module directly into their Ethernet-based back-office systems."

This presented Dione with a major challenge. They clearly wanted to meet the needs of their largest customers, but integrating Ethernet communication into the design of their PIN pad module was not an option. Garrido explains: "Not only would this have meant going back to time-consuming board level design on the product itself, but the adapted product would have also had to go through the EMV compliance tests again – a very lengthy process."

*** The EMV Standard**
On 1st January 2005, the EMV standard will come into force across the UK. Credit and debit cards with magnetic stripes authorised by signature will be replaced with chip cards authorised by PIN. Instead of signing to confirm a transaction, customers will have to enter their PIN number. Companies like Dione are busy developing and supplying retailers, either directly or through the banks, with the hardware required to support these new forms of financial transaction.

It was then that Dione heard about Alpha Micro's NetPort product. Dione had been integrating Alpha Micro's modem modules into terminal designs for many years. "When we heard that Alpha Micro was developing a Serial-to-Ethernet adaptor, we invited them in for a demonstration," says Garrido. "It was truly impressive. You often hear the term 'plug-and-play' used, but you don't often see it in action!"

Within 20 minutes of arriving, Alpha Micro had a Serial PoS terminal communicating effortlessly with a laptop through its Ethernet port. "It quickly became apparent that NetPort could solve a lot of the challenges we faced," concludes Garrido.

PPP - Power to the PIN Pad!

Dione was so impressed with NetPort that it quickly became their Serial-to-Ethernet adaptor of choice and sales are predicted to go well into the tens of thousands. With volumes like this, Alpha Micro was more than happy to utilise its in-house design skills to develop a bespoke version of NetPort with power supplied over Pin 9 of the serial connection. This removes the need for a separate power module and allows Dione's customers to run both the Xtreme PIN pad module and NetPort adaptor from a single power source.

Papakyriacou concludes: "NetPort is targeted primarily at System Builders and OEMs who, like Dione, want to integrate Ethernet connectivity into their product designs without adding to the cost or time-to-market. I am delighted that NetPort has proved itself to Dione and passed its first true test with flying colours."

Ref: am101.doc

For press information, contact John Haynes at Livewire PR on 020 8339 7443 or e-mail john.haynes@livewirepr.com