

Management system

TrafficT9



Publisher: Sohнар www.sohnar.com

Pros: Customised for your business; detailed and complex yet easy to use; very professional interface; cross platform.

Cons: Expensive for one or two person operations.

Min specs: G3 processor; OS X 10.1.

Price: £7,500 including the server and five users, three days consultancy and training, six months support (excluding VAT and travel expenses for training); additional users are £500 each.

Star rating: ★★★★★

Usually the business software we look at in Macworld is general-purpose stuff available in shrink-wrapped boxes. Traffic is something rather different, being highly customised. It's aimed at creative companies, and fully integrates billing, planning, costing, CRM, accounting and more.

Creative agencies and design studios are complex beasts, even the small ones. Trying to keep track of jobs, schedules and costs is difficult. Knowing exactly where every job is at any given time is almost impossible. Traffic is a multi-user database that pulls all that information together and makes sense of it all.

To understand the completeness of the Traffic software it might be helpful to track a job from beginning to end. The first contact with a prospective client might be a letter, email or telephone call. The letter or email can be created in the application, complete with templates, spell checking and HTML email. The status is recorded, and whether a follow-up is required (the follow-up can be allocated to another member of your team). The response, or follow-up is then added to the diary.

If the letter, and follow-up phone call were a success, the next stage is getting a quote out to do the work. If it's a job that the company does regularly, such as an eight-page brochure, it will be possible to use that as a template for the work. If the brochure needs to have 32 pages instead, the application allows for the extra cost. All the user needs to do is specify what needs to be done, and how long it is going to take. The application is preloaded with your costs per hour, and basic production costs; it adds it all up, and you can send out the quote. If there are any changes to the brief when it comes back the hours and costs are simply updated.

So far this is pretty straightforward database stuff, but it's here that the complexity behind the scenes gathers speed. On approval the job is automatically scheduled and each team member's diary is updated to reflect the new job. Each component of the job is obviously reliant on another (so the printing has to come after the design) and Traffic makes a Gant chart so you can add dependencies.

Once work is underway, it's possible at any point to take a look at how things are progressing. If any part is behind schedule, or if costs are too high, Traffic will have the information. Utilising a suite of reports, at any time Traffic can tell you if you are making profit, if estimates

are accurate or if your employees are being efficient. There are over 30 customisable reports that can be generated with minimal fuss. This is where Traffic really excels, and where it will make the biggest impact on a business.

The final part of the process is billing, and Traffic can be set up to output accounts information for Sage Accounting.

The secret to running an efficient and profitable business is being aware of where the profit is being made. With the tools Traffic offers this is a simple task. Because the application is filled with information such as the pay scale of your team, the hourly rates and the hours worked, it can offer information on whether a job is making you money or losing it for you.

The value of being organised is also of tremendous importance. There's no point in working hard, then being lazy when it comes to sending out the invoices. There is also the danger of overloading with work if you don't have a clear picture of your resources.

All this good stuff comes at a cost, however. The starting price for Traffic is a hefty £7,500 with additional users costing £500 a pop. But before you fall off your chair, consider how much this could save in the long run. If you are serious about running a business this is a no-brainer, Traffic will definitely improve your efficiency. If you're not that serious about running a business, Traffic is a pretty good option too. Because if you hate the chore of keeping track of finances, and just want to get on with being creative, Traffic makes your life very easy.

Still, £7,500 is a lot of money, so consider your options carefully. You could struggle along with Excel documents, Word documents, email and address books. You could pay a database developer to make a custom database for your business. But why duplicate the last four years work Sohнар has already done developing Traffic. It isn't going to be cheaper, and is unlikely to be better. More importantly, it will take a lot of time and effort.

The effort of setting up something like Traffic would normally be huge. Sohнар has dealt with this hurdle in a

Streets ahead

Traffic will save you time and money by keeping track of projects, clients, bills, staff and more.

clever way. When you buy Traffic, Sohнар will send you a pre-loader application. It's quite extensive and it will take a while to populate all the fields with your company details. But once you have your prices, team members, company logos, mail server and other details in, Sohнар will take the application back and custom build your copy of Traffic.

The next step is essential, and therefore included in the price, the training. Three days training is provided to get you and your team up to speed with the system. Sohнар's service doesn't end there, though, as the company's website also provides training videos, manuals and more.

Macworld's buying advice

Running any business is a matter of making the most of your resources and capabilities. Traffic gives far more control over your business than any other tool I've seen. Any creative business wishing to grow, or just be more efficient, should consider Traffic. It will increase productivity, reduce waste, and therefore increase profits.

Once you get your head around the reality of this information, the price of the software seems less significant. Traffic offers a demonstrable way to maximise the profits of any creative company, so there are few reasons not to buy it.

David Fanning

