

Small Business is Big Business

Tailoring Wireless Offerings to the SMB Crowd

By Ed Finegold

Picture yourself as a small business owner who needs a dozen or so mobile phones and a few mobile broadband cards for yourself and your employees. You want to pool your minutes, get a good deal on text messages, and maybe use some scheduling, payment, or GPS-based applications on some of your phones. You hit a carrier's website and find lots of information for consumers that doesn't quite meet your needs, and a little information for large enterprises, but nothing specifically for you. So you swing by the local retail store, where a twenty-something with too much



When a small business is evaluated on a one-to-one basis, it can look like a losing proposition for a carrier. The business might only need ten or twenty phones, but wants high-touch customer service, some special features, and discounts like the big boys get. It's tough for a sales guy who's compensated according to a very specific plan

The advertisement features a dark green background. On the left is the Sigma Systems logo, which consists of a dark blue circle with three yellow diagonal lines. To the right of the logo, the text "SIGMA SYSTEMS" is written in a large, dark blue, serif font. Below that, "NEW SERVICES | DELIVERED." is written in a smaller, white, sans-serif font. At the bottom of the banner, the text "Click here for more information" is written in a white, sans-serif font.

gel in his hair tries to sell you a new Android device you don't need. Unfortunately, this has been a reality for many small business owners as they've tried to empower their workforces with wireless services. Fortunately, the tide may be starting to change.

that's either structured for consumers or large enterprises to meet small businesses' needs just right.

Looking at small businesses as a customer segment reveals a different picture. "There are 27 million

small businesses to call on,” says Tom Shaughnessy, director of small business for Sprint. And that’s the challenge. How can a carrier reach 27 million individual businesses, cater to their unique requirements, and provide them the kind of hands-on support their businesses require? Sprint has had a small business focused team in place for about a year now and is focusing a number of key issues it has identified as being fundamentally important for small businesses.

1. **Create Value-Based Pricing:** “Customers want straightforward, value pricing,” says Shaughnessy. That means eliminating overage, roaming, and other hidden fees that wireless customers often run into and become disgruntled over. “As a business, any time you

as much sense as making sure every in-store rep is trained to steer small business customers in the right direction.

3. **Respect the Customer’s Time:** Business hours are hectic for small business owners. They have their own sales to make, employees to manage, and customers to serve. “We now have stores that open at 7 am,” says Shaughnessy, “...and we have appointment setting at all locations.” Business owners shouldn’t have to wait in line to receive service from their carrier. Instead, Sprint lets them make appointments online and skip the queue when they get to the store. “That’s an empowerment issue,” explains Shaughnessy.



2. **Drive Business-focused Service:** “You want to be recognized in the store as a business owner,” says Shaughnessy. That means reps need to talk about services, plans, and features that are relevant to SMBs, and aren’t simply re-branded versions of what’s offered to consumers. He says that having dedicated small business reps in the stores doesn’t make

4. **Dedicate Call Center Support:** The typical call center isn’t usually prepared to handle small businesses’ particular needs. Sprint lets small businesses dial *2 from their handsets which routes them to a business care center staffed by more seasoned, knowledgeable reps. “As your business grows to 25 or more devices, you get a dedicated rep to call who watches your account,” he says.

5. **Create SMB Training Teams:** Sprint now has SMB specialists in its top 40 markets. They focus on preparing retail stores and third party partners to support SMBs. They also help to develop custom proposals and provide continuous training to front-line staff. "Training provides a higher level of employee satisfaction because we are investing in their professional development. The longer the employee stays with us, the better they get" and the bigger the customer base they're able to develop over time, which can translate into more income for the individual.
6. **Retool the Website:** Most wireless carriers' website cater to consumers, and sometimes to large enterprises and government customers. This makes SMBs feel lost in the wilderness. "The majority of purchase transactions start on our company-owned website," says Shaughnessy. Sprint has retooled its website to cater to three different levels of small business, based on the number of devices they need. He adds that half of those customers will call an 800 number, so call centers also need to be ready to deal with small business customers or route them to the proper channel rapidly.
7. **Adjust the Compensation Plan:** Most front-line reps are compensated according to a very specific commission structure. If that compensation plan isn't set up correctly, it can drive reps in directions that aren't best for the customer. "You don't want the customer's experience to be different than what's intended," says Shaughnessy. He says it's an ongoing process to measure and evaluate how sales associates are rewarded to make sure they're doing what's best for each type of customer.
8. **Make the Devices Work Right:** Moving to a new carrier or a new set of devices can be risky for a small business. If email isn't working on new Blackberrys, or number ports aren't conducted correctly, it can result in lost business and upset customers. Shaughnessy says that Sprint's goal is to make sure devices are programmed and working correctly before a customer leaves the store, and that the customer understands how to use a new device for business.
9. **Offer Useful Applications:** Shaughnessy says that scheduling, find-me-follow-me, and GPS-leveraging apps are gaining acceptance and are "the next frontier" for SMB offerings. Small business owners want to know, for example, where their trucks are on the road and how well their employees are performing day to day. Simple mobile apps can address these concerns and Sprint is working with its partners to drive app development in these and other areas.
10. **Partner with Respected Brands:** An emerging trend in wireless is for carriers to partner with big brands from other industries to offer joint apps and services that help business productivity, but also give customers' confidence in the product. The rationale is that the combined brand power has more credibility than either brand on its own. "If Intuit endorses a mobile payment app, that's got more credibility" than if a carrier offers it on its own. "If the small business can tie that back into its Quickbooks, that's very powerful," he says.

SMBs represent a large and somewhat untapped market for communications providers in general, and wireless carriers in particular. It's easy to overlook small businesses when websites, compensation plans, call centers, and retail stores are geared either to consumers or to large enterprises. The market is just beginning to embrace SMBs and recognize how valuable they

are to the bottom line. Sprint's small business team seems to be headed in the right direction. It needs to be if the company hopes to regain the market share it has lost in the past couple of years. At the very least, Shaughnessy's game plan makes sense. His team deserves credit for trying to do right by a market that's been mostly neglected for far too long. As opposed to commercials featuring Dan Hesse, overhyping the Palm Pre, or exacerbating price wars with all-in unlimited plans, Sprint's small business strategy seems like a smart way to go about rebuilding its reputation and customer base. The proof, of course, will be in its performance. Pipeline will check back in with Shaughnessy in the near future to see how things are going.