

SMBs Taking Care of Business - Themselves!

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Customer self-care -- including e-bills and online billing analytics -- can dramatically lower costs and reduce the probability of an SMB customer churning by 14% or more.

Gone are the days when technology and telecommunications providers could sell to and serve small and medium businesses (SMBs) from their enterprise or consumer lines-of-business. The best technology providers recognize the value of this heterogeneous market. The United States' 6 million SMBs account for 50% of the total US employment and 44% of the US's total annual payroll. All in all, US SMB spending on telecommunications services exceeds \$60 billion.



broadband data -- go a long way to meeting the communications needs of SMBs. More and more, SMBs are willing to purchase ancillary technology and IT services like managed/hosted email and messaging; utility computing; managed security; and other services from CSPs and indirect selling partners. These solutions ride on top of the



Savvy communications service providers (CSPs) in the US smell something else good cooking in the kitchen. Historically, SMBs have purchased classic connectivity services from wireline and wireless operators, CLECs and cable TV operators. These services -- fixed and mobile voice, fixed and mobile

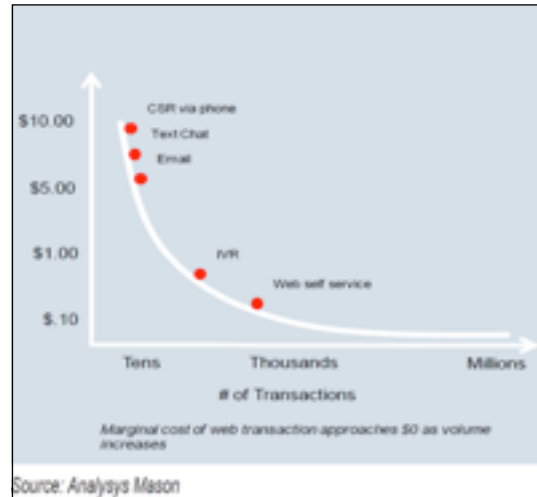
underlying core network connectivity provided by operators.

But the way CSPs service SMBs must undergo a revolution. SMBs have their own business needs, challenges and constraints. Service providers can't

efficiently sell and service SMBs like Major Accounts, because SMBs don't need and can't afford the customized solutions often required through this channel and the operators cannot afford the dedicated resources. However, the mass-market approach of consumer marketing leaves SMBs without enough technology guidance to assemble relevant solutions.

One secret is to put as much self-serve operations infrastructure in place for SMBs as possible to give them control and involvement in their decisions. In essence, CSPs push the work to the SMBs themselves, eliminating the operation support costs from the service providers' books. But keep in mind, SMBs lack the internal technology resources of enterprises, so all selling, support and related tools must be intuitive, graphically-based, and aimed at a non-technical users.

Self-service operations can, if done right, dramatically decrease costs to the CSP, as shown in



Self-service operations for SMBs are spanning the full range of customer interactions, from product selection, sales, through ongoing operations.

Self-Service Product Selection

CSPs such as AT&T, with its award-winning Small Business InSite and the Small Business Mobile Application Recommender Tool (SMART) are



Figure 1. But, of course, a poor web self-service experience can not only result in a poor customer experience, but also spawn an additional customer service representative (CSR) call.

leading the way in the area of product selection self-service. The AT&T InSite web site provides education via articles, on-line courses, and free webinars on how to use technology for business growth, while the SMART tool allows an SMB to create a list of recommended products from AT&T,

based on the SMB's industry, characterization of their mobile workers and devices of interest, and the functions that they would like to perform. Then, with a click on one of the several business solutions presented, an SMB can be connected to an AT&T small business sales representative. Other, more prosaic tasks (such as determining the products available in an area, costs, and available resellers) are also supported.

Self-Service Product Sales

CBeyond is a managed service provider aimed at SMBs. It serves thirteen markets in the US, providing a VoIP platform and services including wireline and mobile telephony, internet access, e-mail, security, VPNs, secure backups, etc. CBeyond found that its customers, which average seven users each, required a lot of personalized service and direct contact. Training their customers on their web self-service portal by sending out a CSR to the customers' locations the first month of

Ongoing Self-Service Operations

On an ongoing basis, self-service capabilities in electronic billing and analysis can be a tremendous money saver for the CSP and a boon to the SMB. Of course, on-line billing for SMBs, just like for consumers, saves the printing, stuffing, mailing – and that all-important stamp, while electronic remittance saves the cost of manually processing the customers' check. Qwest found that an e-bill customer with automatic remittance is 14% less likely to churn than a normal customer. For an SMB, having available a self-serve online analysis package for the bill saves the SMB from having to hire an outside company to analyze the bill, encouraging e-billing. Such a program has helped Verizon Business achieve a 20% paperless rate, twice the industry average. CenturyLink has also implemented such a program, creating an "interactive bill" that consolidates all of what used to be separate CenturyLink bills into a single, online

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service, they are able to run a nearly 100% self-service operation after that, including ordering, changes, rearrangements, and billing. Of course, CSRs are always available, but seldom used.

bill. It implemented this originally for their large accounts, but it was so successful – and so cheap – that they offered it to their SMB customers, as well. And with an average of 80% of calls to a Customer Contact Center arising from billing questions, the ability of an SMB to answer the

questions themselves without CSP involvement can save a vast amount of money.

Many operators have also implemented a method to self-report troubles and be provided follow-up information, both on the web as well as via mobile SMS. Some have even tried Twitter, with some success.

Smart CSPs also use their self-portals for marketing and branding purposes. AT&T's first-generation portal excluded a lot of AT&T branding and self-promotion. Turns out that SMBs expected to come to the AT&T site to learn about AT&T, not just get SMB-relevant business information and watch webinars about modern business challenges. These SMB portals provide ample opportunity for CSP branding which seems to attract, not repel SMBs.

We've all, also, gotten those marketing e-mails, be they promotions, coupons, cross-selling opportunities, specials, or announcements of new services. Carriers who have instant self-ordering capabilities on their web portals can decrease the cost of SMBs signing up and immediately capture that customer's first buying impulse. AT&T, among others, has implemented an iPhone application for their customers, allowing them to do the same thing on their iPhones as they can do on the web portal, including adding services.

Self-Service Success Factors

What makes a successful self-service solution? First of all, it takes all the things that makes any electronic user interface successful – easy to use, intuitive user interface, pleasant to look at or listen to, able to work with the browser that a consumer uses, available any time without broken links or stale information, etc. But beyond those, there are some specific things that relate to SMBs and to the telecommunications market:

☛ A reason for the customer to bother to learn the self-service tools. SMB owners and employees are busy and each must fulfill many roles. The

CSP has to give them a reason to spend the time to learn how to use the self-service system. One large CSP tried charging customers a per-use fee to talk to a Customer Service Representative. It was a public relations disaster. Instead, positive inducements are necessary such as free billing analytics, faster response, or even like Verizon, planting a tree for each e-billing customer who signs on.

☛ Training in how to use the tools. Intuitive, familiar interfaces are the best means of decreasing training needs. But for any functionality beyond the simplest, some training is necessary. Hover menus and explanations, online help facilities, and instructional videos all help. And, for the most sophisticated systems, such as billing analytics or online ordering, having on-site training for the SMB customer can short-circuit many problems.

☛ Coverage of the offered services and information. The system must be capable of covering all of the services of the customer and offer nearly all of the information they want – otherwise they will quickly default to the CSR for all of their transactions.

☛ Multiple-channel information and interaction methods. Customers are increasingly starting an interaction with a CSP via one channel and then switching channels to complete the transactions – web text, videos on the web, e-mail, IVRs, CSRs, all are being utilized. When the customer switches channels, the information already input needs to be available via the new channel. Also, there is a need for a method always to get to a human CSR, via Click-to-dial, callback request, or multi-media direct interaction with a CSR. In this case, it is critical to provide the ability of a CSR to be able to view the same information that the customer can via their self-service means – including desktop sharing and customer “impersonation” by the CSR to meet the

customer's current needs and simultaneously train the customer in how to better use the system.

The Future of Self-Service Operations

With consumers becoming more comfortable with electronic interfaces and the benefits of self-care so evident, the future of the SMB market will clearly be dominated by self-care operations. Here we have described what modern self-care systems are currently doing for SMB customers in leading CSPs. But beyond these examples lies a richer world of new self-care functionality, including on-demand, nearly instant provisioning of new services and features, more mobile-enabled self-care, click-through multi-media and the ability for channel partners (VARs, agents, resellers, etc.) to have similar portal connected in back-office to the customer self-service portal, so channel partners can provide required on-going support to SMBs. For the CSPs, decreased costs, more delighted customers, and greater branding opportunities abound.

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