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Going Global: Expand Your Business with Unified Communications

Want a bigger piece of the world? Some small and medium-sized businesses (SMBs) view global expansion as a daunting task, given their limited financial and staff resources, says Raymond Boggs, vice president of SMB research for the global market intelligence firm IDC. Others, he says, see unified communications—voice, video, and data all running over an Internet Protocol (IP) network—as a way to overcome those limitations.

Boggs recently talked to Cisco® about how companies can use unified communications to successfully conduct business in multiple countries—with or without offices in those countries.

Cisco: How can unified communications help small and medium-sized businesses expand globally?

Boggs: Serving international markets can add significant costs and complexities to your overhead. Unified communications can help businesses avoid that by helping employees be more productive, reducing phone costs, and providing telephone features that enable them to compete more effectively.

Unified communications is especially efficient for conducting business globally. Offshore customers, suppliers, and partners can reach you using the communication method they prefer. Unified messaging, a feature of unified communications, collects your messages into one place for easy retrieval. Despite time zone differences, you can respond to customers and colleagues more quickly, because all your voicemails, e-mails, and other messages go into one inbox.

A unified communications system can also give you a sales and marketing advantage. You could link your unified communications system to a customer relationship management (CRM) solution, giving any employee who answers the phone instant access to a caller's customer file. The employee might notice there are products the caller hasn't tried, for example, and immediately offer the customer a 10 percent discount or other incentive.

Rich media conferencing can be a convenient, cost-effective alternative to international travel. You can use it to do sales presentations or online seminars. It also makes it easy for global teams to work together across different time zones. People can collaborate online wherever they are. They can view the same video or documents at the same time, review them, and collectively make changes to documents in real time, rather than going back and forth.

Cisco: In what other ways can unified communications support business expansion?

Boggs: Offering around-the-clock telephone support can be an important differentiator for a business entering a new market. It helps you build positive customer relationships, which in turn leads to more recommendations of your product or service by locals.

You could set up a virtual, 24-hour support system to handle customer calls coming in from Singapore, for example. Rather than having a Singapore office with employees there to answer the phones, a unified communications system lets you place employees who are fluent in English and Malay anywhere in the world. They can even work from their homes. So it's easier to maintain a small call center staff, with workers answering the phones in shifts. If your employees speak the languages of the international markets you're serving, all of this will be transparent to your customers.

Cisco: What resources does a small or medium-sized business need to get these types of global benefits?

Boggs: You need a secure IP network as a foundation. On top of that, you're probably looking at \$5,000 to \$50,000 to add a unified communications system. The cost depends on various factors. For example: Will you have just a few people utilizing unified communications from their PCs? Or will you have several hundred people using dedicated networked phones?

Designing, installing, and managing a unified communications system requires technical skills in data networking and telephony. You don't need to have all those skills internally. You can get access to those skills through a channel partner, reseller, service provider, or other third party.

Devoting time and financial resources can be a challenge for small and medium-sized businesses. But a challenge is also an opportunity. The fact is, sooner or later, your company will probably need to address offshore competition. So why not take the lead, instead of waiting for it to happen? Why not become the disruptor, instead of being the disrupted?

Next Steps

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