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Building a Profitable UCC Practice: A Channel Guide

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Contents

If there's one business technology set that has weathered the economic downturn and subsequent sluggish recovery better than most, it's the combination of unified communications and collaboration (UCC) solutions. Uplifted by its promises of greater organizational efficiency and improved worker productivity, and fueled in part by the increasing consumerization of IT, UCC has become a perennial favorite of business technology decision-makers.

The multidisciplinary nature of UCC requires facility with networking, systems administration, security, software, and cloud services, along with a working knowledge of a number of specialty peripherals, including imaging devices and digital displays. The list of requirements for implementing and maintaining a modern UCC platform makes it a perfect fit for IT solution providers, which can deliver the benefits of unified communications and collaboration to clients while shouldering the technical overhead that most organizations would be unable to support.

In this Ingram Micro guide, we'll take a look at how solution providers can establish a successful UCC practice by assessing market opportunity, products, technologies, vendors, and go-to-market strategies.

Understanding and Gauging the Unified Communications and Collaboration Market

The term "unified communications" has only been around since the late 1990s, coined when the major communications networking vendors began to recognize the power and appeal of combining their relatively new IP-based voice communications systems with other legacy and emerging services sharing the IP network.

In the short period since, UCC has gone on to encompass traditional messaging platforms such as voice, email, and fax, as well as multimedia services such as audio, video, text messaging, and real-time instant messaging. As the name implies, UCC has also grown to incorporate collaboration and interaction systems such as calendaring, scheduling, workflow, integrated voice response, presence awareness, teleconferencing, and other tools that help individuals and groups work together more effectively.

UCC adoption gained a burst of momentum in the past decade when smartphone-powered mobility and bring-your-own-device (BYOD) initiatives disrupted the way workers thought about accessing their employers' networks and interacting with their peers. The latest study from Grand View Research forecasts that a total of $75.81 billion will be spent on unified communications solutions every year by 2020.

The mobile portion of that market segment alone is expected to be worth $17.38 billion by 2019, up from $5.15 billion in 2014, according to MarketsandMarkets. That's a compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of 27.5 percent. North America currently accounts for some 35 percent of the UCC market, but Asia-Pacific and Europe are expected to catch up in the coming years as similar workforce trends toward mobility and telework expand.

Enterprises still account for most UCC spending and will likely continue to dominate the market over the next six years. However, Grand View found that SMBs have been increasingly deploying the necessary IP infrastructure to support unified communications and will likely represent a stronger market presence in the next three to five years.

UCC is providing more than simple gains in efficiency and reductions in overall cost. The technology is also proving its mettle in smaller organizations by delivering more effective collaboration, improved customer service, and enhanced workflows. Moreover, UCC is now increasingly seen as a tool that allows businesses to improve decision-making and gain competitive advantage through faster access to – and collaboration with – experts in an organization.

The beginning of any new technology practice requires understanding the technology and the market. To start your practice development, you should first define what unified communications and collaboration means to your business and understand the global market opportunity, available business models, and practice requirements.

Defining UCC in the Channel

The nature of unified communications and collaboration as a compendium of technologies rather than a single point solution lends itself to value-added solution providers' delivery models. Most businesses in the small and midsize tier have yet to make the transition from legacy telephones to IP telephony. And their perceptions of the high initial investment and need for interoperability across various communication platforms required of UCC have kept many on the advanced business communications and collaboration sidelines.

In fact, many of the business organizations working with legacy phone systems that haven't been updated in more than two decades are already in possession of updated network assets such as managed Ethernet and MPLS that can be readily leveraged to support unified communications. Over the past several years, channel partners have been reporting success in their efforts to leverage clients' existing WAN infrastructures to migrate businesses to IP telephony, with UCC as an obvious adjacent upsell opportunity.

As a result, UCC support services are expected to generate $53 million over the next two years, according to Ovum. The researchers found that 80 percent of IT decision-makers say they have a plan and sufficient budget to proceed with investment in UCC. And 61 percent of those that have made major UCC investments in the past two years report measurable cost savings and improved employee productivity.

The study found that some 60 percent of global UCC spending last year was driven by the purchase of on-premise solutions, but the researchers added that cloud and hosted systems are poised to rapidly gain share over the next six years.

Perhaps the best part of this channel-driven UCC trend is that, as a solution set, unified communications provide many opportunities for the partner beyond the initial sale and integration engagement. What begins as a unified communications starter system, with basic productivity tools married to IP telephony, can seamlessly evolve into more advanced collaboration solutions featuring state-of-the-art imaging and digital display peripherals, along with the requisite infrastructure and software add-ons to support additional functionality.

Opportunities for repeat sales hinge upon the skill, efficiency, and thoroughness of the integrator. Through successful implementations, solution providers build a relationship of trust with multi-discipline teams, end users, and, ultimately, the executives making the budgeting decisions. A partner's visibility into the client organization, including in-depth knowledge of its business processes and goals, also opens opportunities to expand UCC capabilities – with sophisticated call-center features, for example.

Selling the efficiency, productivity, and competitive advantages of UCC is intuitive to solution providers well versed in the new channel paradigm of leading with a solution's business benefits rather than its technical merits. In the next guide, "Entering the Unified Communications and Collaboration Field," we'll review the prerequisites for developing a unified communications and collaborations technology segment.

Entering the Unified Communications and Collaboration Field

UCC, as a solution provider practice, ranges from basic VoIP telephony and related productivity applications to full-featured unified communications, messaging, and collaboration systems with hooks into a broad swath of an organization's critical systems. As a new entrant to the UCC market, you must understand that it's not as simple as merely selling the rudiments of a Session Initiation Protocol (SIP) infrastructure and IP-enabled end-user devices. UCC requires the development of expertise in networking and SIP, IP PBX functionality, messaging servers, productivity and collaboration applications, security, digital displays and imaging devices, data and systems backup and recovery, and more.

Solution providers that master the UCC offerings of today can develop the enhanced systems of tomorrow by continually reviewing the client's changing business needs and requirements to wring out ongoing opportunities in system upgrades, additional collaboration applications and platforms such as immersive videoconferencing, and more advanced enterprise management tools that can turn the stream-lined communications of a UCC system into concrete business outcomes for the client. Sales that begin largely as consultative arrangements designed to map out UCC strategies can become profitable recurring-revenue relationships that mix high-touch professional services and specialized managed UCC services with transactional sales and other natural extensions into related business and technology offerings.

One area of additional opportunity for unified communications and collaboration solution providers is building the UCC system out to touch other parts of the organization. UCC is ripe for integration with customer relationship management (CRM) and enterprise resource planning (ERP) platforms in ways that can radically improve the way clients deal with both customers and suppliers. These high-touch, high-margin services give end users new and enhanced abilities to coordinate communication and collaboration activities with real actions and process changes. The result is a business that operates more efficiently with an enhanced competitive advantage.

It's important that partners look beyond the integration opportunities presented by UCC and take advantage of their chance to develop a consultative relationship with the customer. That means digging into a customer organization to find out how its people interact and what functions and capabilities would really improve their work. If there's one big shortcoming in the otherwise positive adoption trends around UCC, it's that only about 38 percent of large enterprises say they profile their users as part of their UCC planning, according to an Ovum study. Of those that don't poll users to determine their needs and wants, 20 percent say they simply hadn't thought of doing it. More alarming still is that 21 percent say they feel their employees all have the same requirements, and 13 percent see no value in user profiling.

It's a UCC partner's responsibility to change those numbers and deliver a unified communications solution that works for the people who actually use it, not some cookie-cutter reference architecture that only partially satisfies the unique needs of the client and its workforce.

The ongoing challenge for solution providers will be to continually assess the existing UCC environment with the goal of developing more comprehensive business strategies that take full advantage of the access, insight, and structural awareness these modern UCC technologies afford.

Market Identification

Before any solution provider launches into a new technology or market, it first must ensure it has a customer for its products and services.

UCC adoption in the SMB space has been rising in the neighborhood of 45 percent annually since around 2010, according to IDC. But the market is far from saturated, and solution providers face little danger of being locked out of UCC opportunities in the near term. In fact, the need for UCC is so critical that replacement technologies, cloud services, and professional support continue to offer ample opportunity in this segment.

Sizing up the potential market and expected return is a critical first step in the development of a technology practice such as UCC. In conducting market due diligence, partners should be more concerned with the microeconomics of the serviceable market than the macroeconomic estimates put out by analysts and researchers. If a solution provider's addressable market is a single metropolitan area, using national or global market spending and technology adoption trend numbers alone won't help much when assessing opportunity and making projections about the new business venture.

When it comes to market assessment and identification, solution providers should consider:

- **Customer Type**
  Who wants to buy your UCC products and services? Customers demonstrate a variety of buying patterns; they also have an array of product and support needs, different levels of acceptance for cloud and managed services, and varied purchasing power. The optimal customer for your UCC solutions will be a particular type of decision-maker interacting with you at a particular point in the buying cycle. Through research, successful solution providers develop buyer personas based on these sensibilities. Partners then focus primarily on serving those particular customers. Identifying an optimal customer persona doesn't necessarily exclude sales outside of that target; it simply provides a focal point for understanding primary market opportunity.

- **Customer Population**
  Once the primary customer type is identified by persona, solution providers should try to determine how many of those customers occupy the target service area. It's important to be realistic here; you're not going to service the whole world. Take stock of the true number of customers in core service areas – say, within a 100-mile radius of your metropolitan center – and you'll be able to gauge the sales opportunity more accurately.

- **Customer Budgets and Spending Habits**
  Calculating how much customers may be willing to spend is more art than science, since it's difficult to know what companies truly budget. The larger, macroeconomic analyst reports we mentioned above can come in handy here by offering insight into known figures such as average spending per seat or per company, and by providing estimates on customer spending trends that can be used to calculate rough, per-customer UCC spending in your region.

- **Legacy Installed Base**

  Since UCC isn't exactly a new or emerging technology, most customers in the marketplace are likely to have some form of legacy UCC solution. It's a good idea to understand what those solutions are, as well as their age and serviceability, effectiveness, and expected replacement cycles. In addition, it's equally important to identify technologies that enable and enhance the legacy systems in your target demographic. Sizing the legacy base is tricky, but solution providers can get a rough estimate based on past technology adoption trends and by surveying potential customers.

- **Competition**

  No solution provider operates in a vacuum. Everyone has competition waiting in the wings. When considering the UCC market, you should size up the competition by name, product and service offerings, prices, value proposition, sales capacity, and market share. Understanding the competition will help you determine how difficult breaking into a market will be.

- **Economic Conditions**

  If we learned anything from last decade's recession, it's that SMBs will stretch the use of IT assets long past their normal end-of-life in order to save a few bucks. If the service area you're working in was hard hit in the recession or remains in low-growth mode, you should expect technology spending to take a backseat to cost savings and basic technical viability. Booming economic zones and economies dominated by growth- and tech-focused industries, meanwhile, open opportunities for sales. It's smart business practice to understand market dynamics that can impact sales cycles, price sensitivity, and competition.

- **Internal Capabilities and Resources**

  Chances are you're not starting from scratch. Most generalist solution providers have some capabilities and capacity for delivering UCC products and services. The trickier part is providing professional services for UCC, as well as optimizing UCC processes for maximum effectiveness. Before launching headlong into a UCC practice, you should start by taking inventory of human resources and staff skills, vendor and distribution relationships available for sourcing products and support, and required training and certification needed to support UCC solutions. The availability of these assets and resources – or lack thereof – will help determine the initial investment in developing the offering.

- **Market Value**

  The potential market value is essentially a combination of all the factors listed above. It's the total UCC spend by the target customers within your service area. Estimating the "total addressable market" (TAM), or the potential number of customers and sales within a service area, offers a starting point for calculating the potential of the market. If the TAM is $100 million, you can safely assume that a 5 percent market share of that defined market would yield $5 million in sales, for example. From here, you can determine the investment costs, time to

develop the technology and market, and number of sales required to earn the minimum market share. This will provide a reasonable foundation for understanding whether UCC is a market worth investing in and developing, and whether it will be profitable in the long-run.

Where does a solution provider get all this information? Most of it comes from the customers themselves. A best practice in market assessment is simply interviewing or surveying customers in your target zone to understand their buying habits, technology sources, brand preferences, existing relationships, and legacy systems. Additional data from other sources such as analyst firms, government reports, trade associations, and the media can help fill in many blanks.

Honing Your Unified Communications and Collaboration Value Proposition

Whether delivered as a product or a service, unified communications and collaboration is on its way to becoming an established technology area. The differences among various products and services are often a matter of 1) capacity, in terms of the number of users supported, and 2) capability, with regard to the breadth of messaging mediums covered and the level of integration among them. Technology, in and of itself, is not the unique value proposition you'll bring to your UCC customers. Value is defined by what you do, not what you use to do it.

A successful UCC practice is predicated on a solution provider having a unique value proposition. Value is defined in the plans, policies, processes, and professional support you bring to the customer engagement. In practical terms, UCC value is how you deliver and optimize the various pieces of the unified communications and collaboration solution and then tie them together in support of a customer's business operations.

Solution providers can develop these value-added unified communications game plans independently or use materials offered by specialized UCC vendors. Going the vendor route is most expeditious and costs the least. Many vendors will provide free planning and reference materials and process templates as a benefit of their channel program. While vendor materials are often well-constructed and effective, they tend to homogenize solution providers, leaving little to differentiate partners in the eyes of end-user customers.

Solution providers should always be looking to develop detailed descriptions of their own UCC solutions and services based on their technical expertise, experience in supporting customers, and the unique requirements of their target market and customers. This doesn't require starting from scratch. In many cases, you can use vendor templates and plans as source material from which to draw inspiration and determine a direction for developing your own intellectual property.

To really spell out your value as a UCC provider, you'll need a UCC planning guide and a set of reference architectures and solution sets.

The UCC Planning Guide

Like most modern IT solutions, unified communications and collaboration is less about technology and more about the combined series of processes enabled by that technology. Guidance for the new practice in the form of a planning guide follows five basic steps: assessment, planning, implementation, testing, and monitoring. This framework provides the end-to-end continuity of a well-rounded UCC plan and program. Bear in mind that this logical progression is circular, not linear. Because IT environments are dynamic, as soon as the process ends, it begins all over again. The continual process is designed to ensure that changes and additions are captured and incorporated into the living UCC plan, and the system and processes are updated to incorporate new methodologies and technologies. UCC deployments should begin and end with a dedicated focus on the user experience, and another critical ingredient in the user adoption recipe is training. To ensure the greatest possibility of success, training should be developed with all learning styles in mind, and it should be available long after the implementation has been completed.

In addition, a key differentiator and value add for solution providers is the creation of documentation for each of the following steps. These materials, like the entire process, should be continually evolving. Documentation across a practice should be standardized, and it should be provided to the customer and used as reference for future projects.

Assessment: The partner will naturally need to inventory the client's infrastructure assets in order to determine what upgrades are necessary to support a stable and secure IP platform on which to base the basic telephony and unified communications and collaboration wares. The assessment phase for the UCC partner must go further, however, delving into the mechanics of the customer's processes and workflows and, ultimately, the needs and desires of the workforce that will be using the solution every day. An assessment is about learning, about gleaning data from which you can develop a plan that will meet the customer's needs.

DOCUMENTATION: 1) standardized discovery tasks and methods; 2) customer questionnaires for each user demographic or use case, including delivery method; and 3) assessment report, used to disclose findings to customers and UCC architects.

Planning: The development of a unified communications and collaboration plan takes all the information collected in the assessment phase, prioritizes assets in order to inform the implementation and integration efforts, accounts for regulatory requirements and industry standards for monitoring and managing the communications of employees and contractors, and assigns roles and responsibilities for the ongoing UCC engagement.

DOCUMENTATION: 1) IP workbook defining subnets, VLANs, IPs, and redundant networking; 2) firewall workbook containing all firewall rules, protocols, and endpoints; 3) voice/video/network architecture drawings; and 3) graphical communications/app flows.

Implementation: Your template for implementing the unified communications initiative should break down the process into phases. Typically, this involves upgrading equipment and software, as determined in the assessment process, configuring the system, distributing applications and agents to end-user devices, providing onboarding and training assistance, and establishing policies for ongoing management and operational monitoring. UCC represents a sea change in most organizations, but the goal should be to implement the unified communications and collaboration plan with as little disruption to existing operations as possible.

DOCUMENTATION: 1) all documents produced during assessment and planning phases and 2) task-oriented sign-off.

Testing: Communications is the lifeblood of the modern business, and the partner needs to be aware that the UCC system, like the systems it's replacing, is mission-critical to the organization that it serves. After the UCC implementation and integration are done, you need to test the effectiveness of systems with hypothetical scenarios for disruptions. These exercises will reveal gaps in the plan and weaknesses in performance while you can still make adjustments to improve the communications platform's effectiveness.

DOCUMENTATION: 1) test plan by "service" type; 2) test results; and 3) remediation plan.

Monitoring: Once the unified communications and collaboration solutions are in place, you need to establish processes for monitoring and managing the overall business communications practice. This means making customers aware of their responsibilities with regard to user provisioning and employee access while ensuring you have the necessary command and control facilities in place to administer the UCC systems on the customer's behalf.

DOCUMENTATION: monitoring workbook, including 1) graphical communications flows for monitoring systems; 2) list of what is being monitored; 3) alarm levels; and 4) escalation paths.

As noted above, this process is continuous. You should build into the program provisions for periodic reviews, asset and operational audits, and testing at least on an annual basis. While the process and concepts are straightforward, you can add your own attributes to make the UCC process and the associated professional services unique to your business.

Selecting the Right Unified Communications and Collaboration Vendor Partner

An important part of building your UCC practice is exploring the partner ecosystem and choosing vendors that will provide the underpinnings of your fledgling offering. What you want is a vendor that provides good products, training, market enablement, and distribution capacity to meet your needs. You need a vendor partner with a go-to-market channel program and strategy that complements your business model. And you need a vendor whose technology is accessible on a technical level to your staff and customers.

There is no shortage of unified communications and collaboration vendors and suppliers. There are more than a dozen recognizable, pure-play UCC providers in North America alone, along with a variety of general IT and networking vendors whose bills of fare include portfolios consisting of more specialized unified communications and collaboration offerings.

Picking the right vendor partner is more than just matching a business model to technology; it requires some due diligence. Technology vendors constantly troll the channel seeking new reseller partners. But for solution providers serious about developing a UCC practice, waiting for a vendor's bait isn't a good idea. When it comes to such partnerships, it's better to be proactive; taking inventory of available suppliers and their capabilities can keep you from rushing into a new relationship you may later regret.

Just as you did with your customer identification exercise earlier in the process, you should start the vendor selection process by creating a profile of the perfect supplier based on your needs and the needs of your target customer. Include both big characteristics and small. The intent is to develop descriptive guidelines of an ideal partner and find the vendor that best matches the criteria. The vendor identification assessment should include:

- **Go-to-Market Framework**
  - Does the vendor have a direct, indirect, or mixed go-to-market strategy?

- **Technology/Products**
  - Does the vendor sell hardware, software, or cloud services?
  - Does the vendor require additional vendor relationships to complete a solution?
  - Does the vendor offer options for on-premise or cloud deployments?
  - Does the vendor support managed services?

- **Customer Focus**
  - Is the vendor focused on enterprises, the midmarket, SMBs, small businesses, or a combination of market segments?
  - Is the vendor a specialist or market leader in a particular market segment?

- **Channel Distribution**
  - How big is the vendor's channel network?
  - How many partners does the vendor have?
  - Is the vendor's channel network evenly distributed?
  - Does the vendor have too many partners?
  - Will you have to compete against peers for UCC business?

- **Reputation/Track Record**
  - What do other solution providers say about the vendor?
  - What does the channel press say about the vendor's program and products?
  - What are customers saying about the vendor's products and services?
  - Is the vendor stable and financially viable?

- **Technology Complexity**
  - Are the vendor's products easy to deploy and manage?
  - Who manages the vendor's products once deployed? Is it a managed or cloud service offering?
  - Do the vendor's products require special training or certifications?

- **Attached Sales Opportunities**
  - What are the professional services opportunities? Does the vendor restrict professional services to its own staff?
  - Do the vendor's products complement existing products in your portfolio?
  - Do the vendor's products complement or influence other product sales?

- **Competitiveness**
  - Is the vendor well-known among your customers?
  - How much time and effort will it take to explain the vendor's technology and value proposition to customers?
  - What is the vendor's market share in discrete market segments?
  - Is the vendor a viable competitor?
  - What does the vendor do to market itself to partners and end users?

- **Partner Support**
  - Does the vendor provide quality pre/post-sales support?
  - Does the vendor provide not-for-resale demonstration units and software to partners?
  - Does the vendor provide free or low-cost training?
  - Does the vendor provide marketing and sales materials?
  - What type of sales incentives does the vendor offer? What are the conditions for collecting incentives?

- **Start-Up Costs**
  - What are the costs for training, demonstration products, and marketing materials?
  - Does the vendor require training and certifications?
  - Does the vendor require a certain number of trained or certified staff?
  - How long will it take to recoup investment costs?

One suggestion is to create a comparative grid. By mapping the vendor's operational, go-to-market, product, and channel characteristics on a single piece of paper, you can eyeball how different vendors rate relative to their peers.

	Vendor A	Vendor B	Vendor C	Vendor D	Vendor E
Go-to-Market Framework					
Technology/Products					
Customer Focus					
Channel Distribution					
Reputation/Track Record					
Technology Complexity					
Attached Sales Opportunities					
Competitiveness					
Partner Support					
Start-Up Costs					
Anticipated ROI					
Grade/Assessment					

Evaluating UCC Technology

Even with this information, solution providers should not take vendor specifications and published information at face value. After collecting all vendor information relevant to your business plan, you should talk directly with their existing partners and, if possible, former partners and customers. More often than not, solution providers are more than willing to share the experiences they've had with a particular vendor and its products.

While business model, marketing, and channel program details are important factors in UCC vendor selection, selecting the right technology is paramount. You should consider the technology on two levels:

1. Customer Segmentation
2. Solution Architecture

Customer segmentation is about the size or capacity of the UCC technology/solution. Many UCC vendors develop their technologies and service capacity to service the needs of specific organizations by size and capacity. Enterprises will use a system with greater capacity, security, processing power, manageability, and reporting than an SMB organization. A solution's capacity is often reflected in the product's price and complexity. Vendors either produce a variety of products or specialize in a particular segment. What solution providers should concern themselves with is whether the vendor has a sufficient breadth of products to meet the current and future needs of its target market. A vendor may support a particular customer segment, but it may also need a variety of products at different price points and capabilities within that segment to satisfy the needs of a partner's business and clientele.

Solution architecture is how the UCC solution is deployed and supported. UCC comes in a variety of on-premise and cloud-based forms. Some cloud- and managed service-based offerings are not purely services based. They may, for example, require on-site applications or appliances to facilitate total system functionality. Understanding the technology type, how it's supported, and its complementary support and maintenance functions is essential to selecting the right provider and solution.

Finally, solution providers should understand the road map of a UCC vendor partner. Many UCC vendors are employing a number of technology variants and cloud resources to protect and recover data. Understanding how a vendor is developing future products and sees its technology evolving will ensure that a solution provider has a clear understanding of what to expect today and in the future.

Assessing Your Unified Communications and Collaboration Capabilities

Even as you're taking a hard look at the vendor offerings available to support your new unified communications and collaboration practice, it's important to turn your view inward and objectively consider your own technical and professional skills. Being truly prepared to offer UCC might require new or enhanced infrastructure, a larger staff, or more highly trained support representatives, for example.

Understanding your current resource state and future needs will help you develop and implement a well-performing UCC practice. Major infrastructure and operational considerations include:

Network Operations Center (NOC): For many managed service providers, a NOC is something that already may be part of your operational fabric. This is the command center of your operations, where you monitor for alerts, service outages, and support requests. A NOC can be a simple console, through which alerts and activities are displayed on a dashboard, as long as it provides centralized management for administering managed UCC activities and responding to events.

Management System: Solution providers should have a mechanism or platform for managing account activity, change order requests, maintenance services, and alerts. Many professional services automation (PSA) and remote monitoring and management (RMM) platforms integrate

with UCC tools, providing a means for prioritizing and administering managed services tasks. Management systems should include messaging to technical staff and management, via email or text message, providing a means for escalation for more serious events.

Help and Support Desk: Not every UCC event requires NOC-level intervention. Help and support desks, or Tier-1 support, can often resolve more menial, low-priority issues. Depending on the volume of anticipated support calls, the partner should 1) establish a help desk with operating hours commensurate with customer-support expectations or 2) establish an automated system whereby support calls are assigned to team members for resolution.

Those infrastructure and operational considerations aren't the end of the line. When building out a new practice such as UCC, you'll have to take a hard look at your human resources as well. You may already have people with some of the essential skills required to set up and perform UCC tasks. Technical support, sales engineers, product managers, and project managers may be able to transfer some of their current skills to a UCC practice. Staff with general IT skills will likely take to the technical requirements rather easily with a little training.

But establishing and maintaining a true UCC practice, complete with professional and managed services support, will likely require more skills and different staffing than your current roster affords you.

When you have your plan and business model in place, you should then map the positions and skill sets required to market and support your UCC practice. From the outset of your UCC endeavor, you'll need to train your teams on the sale, implementation, monitoring, and management of customer systems and assets. Once you have your UCC offering operationalized and supporting customers, you'll need to continuously monitor and test the effectiveness of your services and processes for individual customers and groups of customers. Ensuring your team has the ability to execute these plans requires ongoing training and testing, an exercise that will shape the cost of your goods and services (expenses) and, ultimately, your product and service pricing.

Not all of these roles will require individual people to fill. Professional services staff, for example, may provide design and support services to customers, as well as develop processes and intellectual property for the business. You should consider multitasking as many of these roles as possible, as long as that doesn't impede service delivery or operational effectiveness.

Selling and Marketing Your UCC Solutions

With business models, total addressable market, products and services, intellectual property, and unique value propositions in hand, it's time to announce your solutions to the world. Taking a new services practice live requires more than technologies and processes; the real secret lies in sales and marketing.

The sale of unified communications and collaboration is really about selling the concepts of improved workflow, enhanced customer and supplier relationships, and better business decisions.

No solution provider should go to market without first developing a sales and marketing plan. Because UCC is not so far afield from other technology solution sets, the process of selling it doesn't deviate greatly from most other IT sales processes. There are, however, some unique packaging options for UCC, and the ultimate sales and marketing plan is contingent upon the business model, products, and attached professional or managed services you've settled on in your preparation of the service.

Sales and Marketing Objectives

The setting of objectives forms the fundamental starting point of a sales and marketing plan. Objectives aren't just monetary. When developing a UCC practice, you should set milestones that represent monetary and non-monetary goals. These can include:

- LEAD GENERATION: The number of potential customers interested in a sales call.
- SALES APPOINTMENTS: The number of appointments made through sales and lead-generation efforts.
- ACCOUNT ACQUISITION: The number of accounts closed; products sales or services contracts.
- GROSS REVENUE: The gross revenue produced by sales for a given period, usually by quarter or annually.
- GROSS MARGIN/PROFIT: The difference between the sale price and the cost of the goods or services before overhead costs.
- AVERAGE SALE SIZE: The expected average sale size by revenue or units.
- ACCOUNTS UNDER MANAGEMENT: The number of accounts being serviced.
- ARPA (AVERAGE REVENUE PER ACCOUNT): The average revenue generated per account by month, quarter, or annually. This is an important measure in services.
- MRR (MONTHLY RECURRING REVENUE): The recurring monthly revenue measured by account or for the total business. This is an important metric in services, as it indicates predictable cash flow.

By establishing sales and marketing objectives, you can measure your progress in developing your UCC practice, the effectiveness of your sales program, and the contributions your UCC investments are making to the totality of your business.

Marketing Programs and Materials

Sales is about acquiring accounts and generating revenue. Marketing is the activity that leads to sales. How sales leads are generated is well-known: Solution providers can advertise in local and national publications, on Websites, and in mass mailings; host live seminars and digital Webinars; and count on positive word-of-mouth endorsements from existing customers. The common denominator is content.

Content is an oft used, poorly understood word. Conferences, seminars, videos, brochures, white papers, case studies, Websites, and blogs are all marketing vehicles, and they all depend on content. Content is how you package and convey the function, value, and benefits of your solutions and services.

Many vendors will provide you with ample product specifications and some marketing materials – many of which will accommodate your logo. These are useful, but they won't do enough to convey your brand or value to prospective customers. At the very least, you should develop some content independently, documenting what you do better than anyone else. This content should include:

White Papers: A white paper that details what your company does and how it does it (unique methodologies and processes) will provide reference materials for how you approach UCC technologies, services, and support.

Capabilities Presentations: This is a standard set of slides that every executive and salesperson in your organization can use to concisely describe the market, UCC technologies and practices, and how your company addresses the UCC needs of customers at various levels.

Technical Briefs: This is where you can save time and money. Vendors produce copious technical materials, and most will allow you to co-brand these materials. You need technical briefs to demonstrate the functions, features, and performance of the products – hardware and software – used in your UCC solutions. You should also develop technical briefs on your unique solutions, documenting the interoperability of products to form a complete solution.

Marketing Materials: When talking with customers, you should always leave something behind – brochures, case studies, research, product specifications, etc. Again, product and cloud vendors produce large volumes of material for you to distribute to your customers, but this only promotes their brands. You need your own materials that complement or independently promote what you provide with your solutions and services.

Developing content can be expensive and challenging. Nevertheless, you can't go to market without filling your sales team's kit with material that conveys your value. The essential materials above can be used at conferences, on Websites, and at lunch-and-learns and sales meetings. With this foundation, you can develop more material over time that raises awareness about UCC needs and your ability to deliver solutions.

Taking Unified Communications and Collaboration to Market

Now you're ready to take your shiny new unified communications and collaboration practice to market. Think of it as constructing a jet fighter. You've done all the advance work necessary – the studying, planning, product selection, staff training, and content creation – to build the jet. All you need now is a skilled, firm hand at the controls to give your vehicle guidance and velocity. Going to market is all about steering and direction.

The final task you'll need to complete is what's known as a "30-60-90" business plan, an essential go-to-market planning tool that spells out key deliverables and milestones you need to hit in the first 30 days, 60 days, and 90 days of your UCC practice launch. Your best sales and customer engagements

will happen within this time frame, and your initial sales will give you experience in refining your sales model and service delivery practices, testing your methodologies and assumptions, challenging your capacity models, and exposing your marketing to real-world customers.

Some solution providers and vendors like to treat the first 90 days of any new practice launch as a "pilot," a test period in which the practice isn't fully exposed to market but is in a good position to gain valuable feedback and experience for when the UCC offerings are made generally available. The 30-60-90 day plan is a sensible way of testing everything about your UCC practice with good measure.

You should take the following factors into consideration when building your 30-60-90 plan.

- **Launch Products**
  While your UCC practice will likely support a number of different scenarios and customer segments through the use of different hardware, software, and service products, it's a good idea to limit the number of products taken to the field during the launch window. By limiting yourself to one or two products, you give yourself the opportunity to focus on specific customer segments and gain experience on repeatable implementations. Hitting the market supporting too many different products and implementations simultaneously could overtax resources.

- **First Customers**
  The list of customers to which you'll introduce your new UCC practice must mesh with the products you decide to take to market. First customers will most likely come from existing accounts and will be identified based on prior engagements, knowledge of their operations and IT challenges, and experience with UCC solutions. Throughout this development process, you should have engaged with customers to learn their UCC needs and past experiences with UCC products and services. These same customers – often called "early adopters" – will likely be the first to try your UCC solutions.

- **Publicity**
  You should have a plan for publicizing your UCC offerings. Prior to launch, you should be talking with the media – mainstream and trade – in your market. Your internal marketing and public relations team (or contractors) should have your senior executives – from CEO to product managers – giving interviews about the need for UCC solutions and how your service will provide positive and measurable business outcomes for your clients. Media publicity is a good way of raising awareness of your capabilities and seeding the market for sales during the launch period.

- **Sales Objectives**
  Boil down the sales objectives – number of leads, meetings, and sales conversions – you crafted earlier for inclusion in your 30-60-90 plan. Your new UCC practice needs a solid revenue footing to recoup initial investments and support operations. These initial sales are tests for both your sales methodologies and the viability of the practice at large.

- **Field Testing**

  As you deploy your first customers, you should be testing procedures and operational efficiency. While you tested different scenarios during your development, the launch period will provide real world experience with a low volume of activity. This gives you the opportunity to make adjustments before you start adding more accounts and utilizing more capacity.

- **Feedback Collection**

  At the end of your 90-day launch, you should go back to your customers and get feedback. You'll have your own perceptions on how well your UCC practice is performing, and your customers will have a different take on things. Your first customers know they are part of a launch and, in most cases, are willing to provide feedback for improving processes and performance. Use them to your advantage.

Research, Improvement, and Evolution

The work doesn't end when your unified communications and collaboration practice hits the market, however. Evaluating and measuring performance isn't just about reaching arbitrary goals; it's equally about making improvements and evolving your UCC practice to meet customer expectations, address future market and operating conditions, and consider new, innovative technologies.

Make a plan for research and development of your UCC practice. Set a budget for evaluating new technologies and products, subscribing to research through associations and professional groups, and developing new methodologies and products through your own engineering staff.

Form a customer advisory council or similar focus group. Customers are your best source of information; they'll tell you the good and the bad, and they'll share information about what competitors are pitching to them. Your customers have a vested interest in seeing you succeed, and they'll contribute to your development and maturation.

Above all, evolve. You've spent significant time and effort developing your initial UCC practice. Technology, markets, and customer expectations change. Partners need to constantly invest in improving and expanding capabilities. Think about vital services such as UCC as anticipatory practices. By planning for the future, you'll stay sharp and relevant to your customers.

Unified Communications and Collaboration Solution Sets

When building a unified communications and collaboration practice, solution providers need to create system and process designs that are repeatable across multiple customers. Call them what you will – systems designs or reference architectures – but they're unified communications and collaboration recipes that you can use to quickly explain, demonstrate value, and implement in customer environments.

The good news is that many vendors publish reference architectures and methodologies that you can use whole cloth or adapt for your specific purposes. If you're more industrious, you may want to develop your own solutions based on technologies provided by your vendor partners and cloud providers. Your solutions may also include home-grown applications and tools. If you take the home-grown route, you should also brand your solution to make it your own.

The point of building methodologies, processes, and systems within your UCC practice is providing your business with a unique value proposition and competitive differential relative to the rest of the market.

Since so much of UCC is based on processes and support, you have the opportunity to pull together your own reference architectures, processes, and methodologies into comprehensive packages that you can present to your prospects and customers.

This doesn't mean you abandon conventional marketing scripts. Packaging around your unique value proposition is meant to enhance your marketability, competitiveness, and, ultimately, sales. You should consider a few things when creating a UCC package.

Solutions: All products going into your UCC solution are merely components. You should consider giving names to the reference architectures you develop. When you create solutions, even when they use components from vendor partners, you're creating a new product. By giving these products a name, you're separating them from the offerings of competitors and shining a spotlight on your value.

Services: Given the low barriers to entry today, nearly anyone can offer a managed or cloud service. Partners should look at the unique attributes of their UCC services to package around a differentiating value.

Professional Services: The assessment methodologies, development of checklists, and periodic testing and auditing services are all marketable as products. Assigning a brand to these functions and tasks will help make customers more familiar with them and distance your services from those of the competitors.

How you package your solutions and services can greatly impact both pricing and marketing strategies. What you're trying to create is a tiered system in which customers easily associate your brand with a particular need. This is the same reason vendors create different series of hardware and

software; functionality, capacity, and price are geared toward a particular customer or buyer persona. By assigning branding and packaging, you make your UCC products and services easier to understand and their value proposition more salable.

Determining Your Business Model

While the end goal of a UCC practice is to provide end users with more effective ways to communicate and collaborate internally and externally, there are multiple ways in which a solution provider can deliver this product and value proposition. In short, UCC can be a product sale, a managed service, a cloud computing service, a hybrid model, a professional service, or, in some cases, all of these characteristics rolled into one.

It's simply not enough to say you offer UCC products and services; you must build a business plan around a model to create a repeatable, sustained practice. While every solution provider will have its own unique value proposition and go-to-market strategy, all UCC practices fall under the same basic business models.

- **Product Resale**
  This is the classic model of the channel. The solution provider enters into a partnership agreement with one or more UCC product vendors for the purposes of reselling product to end customers. The business model is predicated on solution providers making money through the discounts they get on the products they purchase for resale. The solution provider can generate additional revenue through installation and maintenance services.

- **Professional Services**
  Professional services go beyond installing and maintaining systems to include offering expert support, understanding UCC needs, and crafting, inventorying, and prioritizing UCC plans and processes. Professional services may be delivered without an attached product component; some professional services organizations are great sources of product sales referrals.

- **Managed Services**
  UCC is fast becoming a staple of the managed services segment. MSPs have been providing managed UCC for several years, and most remote monitoring and management (RMM) tools either support or integrate with a wide array of UCC products, tools, and services. Unlike product sales, though, the UCC managed service is built on a recurring-revenue model, under which the solution provider and customer remain attached through the ongoing support and operational services provided by the MSP. The managed services model offers predictability in revenue and profitability to those that can scale their sales and accounts.

- ## Cloud Services

  Cloud-based communications-as-a-service offerings are growing in popularity and providing a significant option for partners looking to develop a UCC practice quickly and with lower up-front investment. Cloud-based unified communications lower initial costs by hosting phone, messaging, and collaboration systems over the Internet, giving partners and their clients access to high-end features and upgrades at a fraction of the cost. Today's cloud UCC offerings are feature-rich, with a full slate of messaging capabilities and a host of built-in disaster-recovery network optimization features to ensure quality of service.

  Available from anywhere, cloud services are also adept at handling today's increasingly mobile workforces, and their flexibility and scalability give solution providers a way to deploy UCC services that are repeatable yet still customizable. Variations on the cloud model include private-cloud UCC, which is increasingly popular with larger businesses concerned with maintaining control of the system, and hybrid cloud, which mates communications-as-a-service offerings with on-premise assets for the more critical aspects of the system . Building and supporting UCC in private or hybrid clouds is about more than just product sales and installation; it's a combination of reselling and offering installation and professional services.

- ## Referral/Agent

  Not every UCC practice requires products or services; some are based purely on sales. Many carriers, telecommunications companies, IT vendors, hosting companies, and large cloud service providers are offering UCC as part of their services portfolios. They're going to market with channel partners, but not in the conventional reseller sense. Instead, many service providers offer referral fees to "agents" selling on their behalf. The model provides a share of the service sale, but the partner retains little or no account ownership. On the plus side, the referral model has a low barrier to entry. The downside is that the referral model offers solution providers few value-add opportunities.

Before launching a unified communications and collaboration practice, you need to select one or a combination of these business models on which to build your business. Oftentimes, the selection process is relatively easy since you must also take your existing business model, services, and product portfolio into consideration. MSPs will likely gravitate toward the managed services or cloud models. Systems integrators will have a proclivity toward private cloud development. Smaller solution providers and telephony agents may be fine with simply referring sales and accounts to large service providers.

Ultimately, though, the model you choose will be determined by the customer and the target market you serve. As noted above, you must understand your primary customer, their business needs, and the technology they're most willing to adopt. It's critical to understand the customer and offer solutions through a business model that provides you with the greatest opportunity for success.

Industrious solution providers may consider another option in the development and maturation of their UCC practice: amalgamation. You may start out singularly focused on one of these models, but branch out over time to offer different flavors of UCC services. Having multiple product and service offerings that provide the same basic ends is good for a solution provider's business as it allows you to serve a broad array of customers.

The foundation for launching a successful UCC practice and expanding into multiple product and service models is a well-thought-out business plan. It provides a map for developing, refining, and evolving your UCC practice. Most business plans include common elements, such as:

- EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: What is the plan's intent, and what are the anticipated outcomes?
- BUSINESS DESCRIPTION: What is it that you do?
- VALUE PROPOSITION: What makes you different?
- INDUSTRY ANALYSIS: What are the technology and adoption trends?
- COMPETITION: Who is going after the same customer as you?
- MARKETING STRATEGY: How will you take your product to market?
- BARRIERS TO ENTRY: What can hinder you from achieving your goals?
- SALES MODEL: Who will sell your product or service?
- TEAM ROSTER: Who are the key stakeholders that enable this offering?
- SELF-ASSESSMENT: What are your company's strengths and weaknesses? Where are you vulnerable and where do you have opportunity?
- FINANCIAL ASSESSMENT: What are the investment costs, sales mandates, revenue and profit targets, and anticipated ROI?
- METRICS: What are the measures and milestones by which you will evaluate your progress?
- FUTURE DEVELOPMENTS: What are the expansion plans beyond the core UCC product and sales base?
- EXIT: What is the ultimate goal for the practice – to sell it, continue expanding, or maintain steady operations?

A business plan is the instrument that operationalizes the UCC business model. Solution providers that act without a business plan often languish in mediocrity. Having a business plan that outlines goals, business development processes, go-to-market strategies, and success factors will aid in the development and acceleration of your UCC practice.

About

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