

# Set Sail for Telecom Success

BY LINDA BENNETT

Follow this map to replace your old "boat anchor" telecom system.

Navigating the stormy waters of telecom can be a challenging experience. There are so many choices, so much hype, and who knows what monsters lurk below the surface. Fear not, sailors on the technology tide, if you chart your course by this map, you'll find the telecom system that's right for your business.

Your old telephone equipment fulfilled your needs when you got it. But business changes, customer expectations change and the benefits that new technology brings may be just what you need to take your company to the next level and increase profitability.

## Evaluate and Plan

Before you begin the voyage, evaluate your current situation. What do you like about your old phone equipment and the vendor? What makes you want to throw both of them overboard? How do employees get messages, faxes and e-mails when they are in

or out of the office? If you could record calls, would it increase the accuracy of orders or other information taken by phone? What if you could handle more calls with fewer people while making your customers happier?

Plan for the future beyond the horizon. How much growth do you anticipate? Will you add staff, products or locations? Think outside the ship ("the box" in landlubber's terms) and visualize how you want your business to run.

## Pirate or Commodore? Call in the Vendors

Contact three to five companies that are authorized dealers for well-known manufacturers of telecommunication equipment. (More than five, and you'll drown in the confusion.) Meet with a sales representative from each company. Share your vision of the ideal telecom system; then ask for suggestions. A good rep will ask more

questions to fully understand your business, to uncover ways to reduce expenses and to increase efficiency.

Don't let an outdated "boat anchor" weigh you down. Choose equipment with a reputation for reliability and a pathway into the future. Make sure the system has the capabilities to help your business succeed, but features are worthless unless they are easy to use and the system is reliable. Does the manufacturer have a history of making new technology compatible with older models, or do they discontinue products frequently so you have to start over when your needs change?

## New Technology

As you consider the newest technologies, be cautious to avoid sinking the ship. For example, voice over Internet protocol (VoIP) is an option to connect a main location with branch offices or off-site workers. If you con-

sider a fully VoIP only system, however, be aware of the risks, including security and reliability. Glitches with data are common, and when voice is added to your data network, you may experience glitches in your voice communication, as well. Spend the extra money to have an assessment of your data network to make sure it will support voice traffic. Be aware that future changes on your data network can affect the quality of your voice communication. A "converged" system, which combines the reliability of a traditional telephone system with VoIP capabilities, is a low risk choice.

## Smooth Sailing Installation

Careful coordination and attention to detail will ensure that installation is a breeze, so ask vendors about the process. It also makes good sense to evaluate your local, long distance and Internet services. Carriers change

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plans frequently, so there may be a better one available. Plus, some services require special equipment.

## A Good Crew

Certified technicians with years of experience in voice communications are most likely to provide a good installation and on-going service. Even the best equipment has problems if it is installed and programmed poorly. Make sure that the technicians who work on the equipment are certified by the manufacturer, have years

of experience and are employees instead of contractors for better quality control. You can't learn everything in class or out of a book—some things take experience. If you plan to administer the system yourself, you still need technical support as a backup.

## Get the Best Value

Low price does not mean best overall choice in telecommunications. So, look for the best value to keep you afloat. Be sure you understand everything that is included in the proposal.

Look for training, cabling, battery backup, service policies, warranty and finance options.

## Choose the Right Guide

The local company you trust to guide you on the journey is the most important factor. The stability and reputation of the vendor is critical to their ability to provide service and support in the future. You can learn a great deal about the company by visiting their office. Find out what their customers have to say and what

sets them apart from the rest. You are entering into a long-term relationship, so pick a company you can trust.

The good news—no, the great news—is the right technology provided by the best company can improve your business and increase your bottom line. So, follow this map, matey, and you'll find the company that will give you smooth sailing on the ever-changing waters of telecommunications.

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