



TELECOMMUNICATIONS AND ONLINE SERVICES BUYERS GUIDE

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MANAGED IT QUESTIONS

INTRODUCTION

You don't know what you don't know which is a problem when you are looking for a technological service or solution for your business. What questions should you ask? What answers are you looking for? Through research you learn the right questions to ask, you learn what to compare, apart from price.

Whether you are a small business owner just starting your business or an established business reviewing your current providers with fresh eyes you can improve your bottom line and quality of service by asking the right questions and building your knowledge.

Your business requires the services of third-party vendors. We all know this is necessary to run your business and provide the services you need to deliver to your customers in an effective and profitable manner but with the myriad of providers touting for your business, how do you know who to choose, what questions should you be asking?

This brief e-booklet will cover some of the services you will be looking for including a phone system and website, a way of tracking prospects and clients, possibly a conferencing capability and a business messaging service. Finally who and how will your IT requirements be managed now that third-party Managed IT services are a real option for many businesses?

Phone systems will be discussed with all the variables that they come with including; what phone functionality do you require, is it an on-premises or a hosted VoIP service? What analytics can you tap into? What degree of mobility do you require of your phone system?

All business requires a web presence which opens a whole can of worms in development, design and what can be called "findability". You need to have a clear understanding of what you want your website to do and look like. Is it just brochureware or is a functional website such as an e-commerce website? How do you get your idea of a website out of your head to the point of it being published?

Customer Relationship Management (CRM) is essential for any business. From the beginning, you start with Excel to keep tabs on your clients but as the business grows you soon find a CRM platform is required. It doesn't have to be complex, just enough to manage a sales funnel. You need to track leads, prospects, opportunities and clients

with follow-up client relationship management. But then what? What do you want to get out of your CRM platform? How do you use it to increase revenue and reduce client churn?

With the advent of Skype for Business and other VoIP based services you may think conference providers are a thing of the past but the fact is if you have a mid to large geographically disperse business or client base requiring larger scale communications, optimum security, accountability or managed conference calls or just want to hold professional webinars then you will be looking for a 3 party conferencing provider to partner with but again how do you choose and what don't you know that you should know?

Business messaging has become an integral part of the communications requirements for a business. For simplicity sake, we will confine business messaging to SMS services, MMS services, email services, online fax services and Voice or Text to Speech (TTS) services. Again, what applications can you use messaging for? What questions should you be asking?

And finally who is your managing your technology, your hardware, your software, your applications, your data, security, and backups? More and more businesses are moving to a managed IT model or to a total virtual desktop environment looking after your on-premises environment through remote access management right through to having everything in the cloud. This area of business is core and requires clear communication with vendors. Asking the right questions means you will have a clear understanding of what is being proposed.

These essential services from respective service providers are no longer restricted by locality. Online services mean you can access services no matter where you or your service provider are located.

You need to be careful when selecting your service providers, gathering as much information as possible. This is necessary to ensure your business engages the most appropriate services to support and help in the operation of your business. If you are not careful you may make the mistake of getting involved with the wrong service provider that may drag down your business, affecting its smooth operation.

For this, you need to have a detailed discussion with them to confirm all aspects of engagement. You need to get all the information about their service quality and capability, price, extent and reach of their service. This is simply done by asking specific questions of your selected service providers. Spreadsheet your questions and answers to ensure you are comparing apples with apples. Look for answers from the provider's website and look at comparison sites or relevant marketplaces.

After carefully analysing service providers on offer and creating your short list, you have enough information to make an informed decision.

It's time to select a winner amongst those on your list (winner because the end result should be a win/win result for both parties to ensure a long-term vendor partnership.)

During this end stage of selecting the right service provider for your business, you have to make sure that they satisfy all the requirements you need.

You may expect a service provider to offer their services satisfying all requirements but don't assume certain services are standard when in fact they may not be included, so double check this before entering into any contract.

Based on this you can make the final decision as to the suitability of a service provider to your business. Let's have a look at the buying segments in the procurement process.

TELECOMMUNICATIONS

There are different components of a telecom service you need include in your telecoms assessment. These include phone systems features such as the number of extensions you require, is audio/video conferencing, call recording or intelligent call monitoring required. What management of VoIP services is offered and is it as an on-premises business managed systems or hosted phone systems? Is internet connectivity with fiber or other types of Ethernet or wireless connectivity required?

When selecting a service you need to consider the following:

- **Reliable service delivery:** You must be 100% confident that your service providers uptime meets industry standards and has the support structures in place to ensure they are able to restore the service as fast as possible if it goes down to mitigate any business loss.
- **Network security:** Due to increasing Cyber-attacks, the system you select must be able to withstand attacks from cybercriminals. It must fully conform to the latest standards in cybersecurity.
- **Flexibility:** Telecom technology is ever-changing, and the service provider you choose needs to be flexible enough to provide timely upgrades and inform you about them as they become available.



- **Customisation:** The service you choose should provide the ability to select only the services relevant to your business and perhaps offer customized inclusion.
- **Customer support:** This is a very important aspect of your service and you must know how fast your service provider responds to your need and how they are able to understand your changing requirements and provide clear reporting when required.
- **Best value for money:** In business, a higher price doesn't always imply the best service and you therefore need to find the telecom service provider who offers you the best value for money for your specific circumstances.

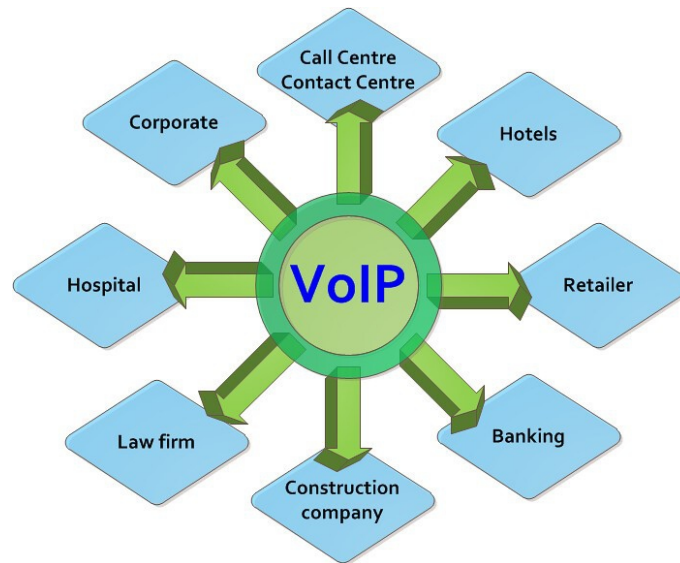
FAX SERVICES

Fax is dead. Right? ... Wrong! Many businesses still use fax for many reasons. It may still be the industry standard or documents still need to be printed to for physical stock process or tracking requirements. Some refer to fax as pre-printed email. Real estate offices, medical practices, schools, farmers, builders, tradespeople or any government offices, will usually still use faxes. Some industry sectors such as agriculture may not have great internet reception. In that instance, they opt for a fax machine so they can receive faxes via a telco connection when the internet is not an option. Security and delivery receipts are often essential. The fact that you can track actual document delivery and encrypt documents in motion and stationery is important.

If you send fax on an ad-hoc basis then Desktop Fax (fax to email/email to fax) is the way to go. You will remove all fax machine maintenance costs, substantially reduce manual process costs, reduce your call costs and create a digital record for compliance and risk management. If you have a recurring fax document send requirement on a large scale then you can often simply set up your software to email out faxes or use an API to integrate your CRM, ERP or accounting software with a fax service provider to generate and send purchase orders, tax invoices and remittance statements.



VoIP, PHONE, CALL CENTRE AND INTERNET



Things you need to take into consideration when selecting the right VoIP and internet Services are:

- What phone, Internet or VoIP service are you currently using?
- Do you have 4G redundancy for your internet connection?
- What are the features needed in your VoIP and Internet services?
- Are there features, and security levels required for these services in your company depending on the job function or position
- Type of phone service needed whether standard phone, Soft-Phone and/or IP phone with routing capabilities.
- The budget that is available for the service.

Connectivity is key to any service requirement. Asking the right questions such as those below will help you define the practical outcomes and additional requirements you may need to achieve the best result.

➤ **Are you offering a Hosted or Managed VoIP service?**

A managed VoIP system is more expensive initially as the entire set up will be installed in your premises, you will need to provide a secure and airconditioned environment, need to protect your equipment, be prepared to troubleshoot issues that need immediate attention and be effectively responsible for the management and maintenance of your VoIP setup. Whereas with a hosted set up the entire equipment and service will be managed by the service provider or a third party.

➤ **Does the VoIP service come with mobile integration?**

Look for a VoIP system that comes with mobile integrations as the world moves to mobility. It will give you and your workers with the ability to participate in video conference calls and answer direct calls even when they are outside your office improving productivity.

➤ **Tell me about your QoS – Quality?**

QoS is an essential feature that prioritizes internet traffic for voice over data traffic to maintain voice quality.

➤ **Will you test and tell me if my internet line is ready for using VoIP?**

The quality of the VoIP system depends on the quality and type of internet service you use. This will test your current internet speed. Ascertain from them if your connectivity is adequate or requires improvement.

➤ **What are my options to get the required internet connectivity?**

Your internet connectivity will need to be matched to the size of your operation. You may be connected to the NBN or have a bandwidth which will do the job for a 15 - 20 person office and the type of work that office does. You may also employ a call centre that requires Fibre connectivity or you may need to use ethernet to connect to a local exchange for a first mile or last mile solution. The cost of these solutions will affect the cost of any solution.

➤ **What is the total cost of the service?**

This should come out at the proposal stage but you need to get a ballpark idea of the cost you may need pay for the VoIP service as part of your short-listing process. This includes connectivity costs, the cost of equipment and installation and other service-related expenses. Are you going to be charged for managing and maintaining your system in addition to the call charges? Check if they are adding some unneeded services as a part of the package and adding more to your overall costs. You need to decide if this provider is realistically within budget.

➤ **Is your system scalable?**

When you are expanding, your VoIP system also must expand to provide the required level of service. Ascertain if the service you are selecting now is cloud-based and can be scaled up to your required level at any time. Again, check if future expansion plans will suit your connectivity requirements.

➤ **Will you be providing me with any application or equipment to test the quality of the VoIP service?**

As maintaining high-quality calls on your VoIP service is necessary, it would be very helpful if a shortlisted company could provide any application or equipment to test and check the quality of service as part of the management of the ongoing service.

➤ **How much I can save on my current phone bills when I opt for your VoIP service?**

This is to check if there is a real cost advantage of going for a VoIP service over using the regular phone service. Do the comparison you may find that sticking with your current set up is in fact your best option.

➤ **What are the main features available in the VoIP service?**

This will provide you with the features that come bundled with the service package and help you determine that the service you are selecting has all the necessary features required for your business. This may include reporting and advanced analytics for calls center solutions.

➤ **Do you offer money back guarantee in case I am not satisfied with your service?**

This is an essential part of your contract and will help you exit the service if you do not want to continue with your VoIP service provider.

➤ **What are your equipment return policies?**

Check if they are going to charge for the equipment you have used when you cancel the service and implications of any other terms.

➤ **What are the terms of contract if I choose to go with your VoIP service?**

This will give the main terms of the service you are getting from the provider. Understand payment terms for cash flow requirements and warranties for service delivery redress. Don't avoid checking the detail as there is real money sitting in those terms.

➤ **Are my numbers locked into a complex number block effecting portability?**

Portability is the ability to move a number from one carrier to another. Understanding portability is essential. Is your number tied to a number block limiting number portability? There are categories of number for porting purposes both CatA, a standard port and Cat C, more complex port. Be prepared to allow 20 plus business days minimum if you have a CatC port with multiple numbers that may be tied to a hunt group. CatA is a simple port that can be completed within a week or two.

➤ **Are additional features that add value to the VoIP service available free as add-ons to your main VoIP account?**

This is an opportunity to reduce add-on costs. You can avoid paying more for some of the features that you will only be using occasionally.

➤ **Do you offer any backup service in case there is an outage of the regular VoIP service?**

This will help you continue your business communication without any downtime while the an outage is being fixed ie internet auto changes to 4G.

➤ **Is the equipment you are offered as part of the contract rented or purchased?**

Your provider will include VoIP phones that are specially made for VoIP services. This will address operational costs, the total cost of ownership and cash flow. A VoIP router is also necessary equipment for allocating the right bandwidth to your VoIP service and maintains quality of calls.

➤ **What are the equipment terms, and what is the time period when I am eligible to retain the equipment in case I have to change the VoIP service providers?**

This relates to the situation when you are forced to change the providers, as equipment including phones can range from a couple of hundred dollars to well over one thousand dollars per phone dependent on your requirements.



- What are the other benefits or discounts available now so that I get the best price for your service?

This will help you understand the pricing your provider is going to charge you, and the discounts, coupons and freebies available to you that will add more value to your service.

Call Centre Features.	
Call recording	Improve quality of calls and upgrade skills of agents
	Capture missed or forgotten details
	Track information about customers and enhance customer service
	Develop customized products by isolating critical aspects of a conversation
	Reputation management and improve regulatory compliance
Call monitoring and Voice Washing	Send alerts when key words are detected through speech to text
	Send alerts when a caller's voice changes pitch.
	Send alerts when a caller sighs.
	Check Agent activity and associated underperformance.
Call Queue Management	Helps high call abandonment rates through the option leaving a call back request
	Helps high call abandonment rates through engaging in music, news or messages.

Intelligent call routing	Intelligent routing of contacts lets you optimize your agents.
	Reporting makes it easier to predict call volumes for scheduling overflow requirements.
Call resolution	Improve call resolution by automatically routing the last called agent.
Integrates with CRM	This is key to managing your call contact information

➤ **What about customer service?**

Are they providing 24/7 customer service through technically qualified people and what is their level of commitment for very high uptime and what is their contingent plan for rectifying any outages at the earliest possible time?

➤ **How reliable is your service?**

This gives the reliability factor for your service. Is it 99.999% uptime and do you need 99.999% for your type of business.

➤ **What is your support structure?**

This is to know the service escalation points or “go to” people in an organisation based on issue severity and to maximize response levels.

➤ **What is your product range and product offerings?**

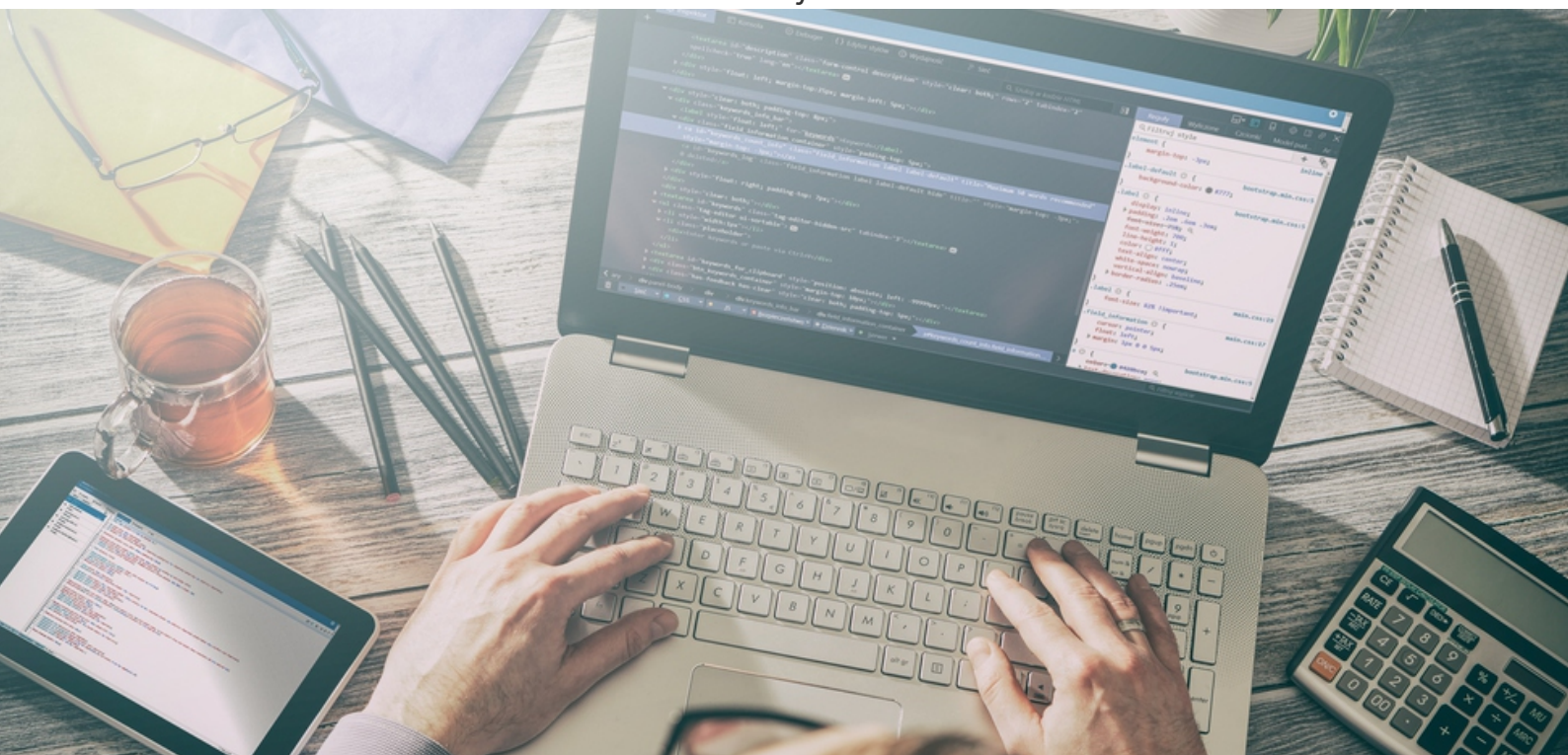
Ask this question to find a product or service that has not been offered in case they have an undisclosed offering that may be a better fit.

ONLINE DEVELOPMENT - WEB AND MOBILE APP DEVELOPMENT

Choosing the right web developer or Mobile App developer is the real problem you will be facing while planning to build the website or mobile app for your small business. There are many web development companies competing with each other to grab your attention to get their next project. You have to be very careful in selecting the right web or mobile developer to entrust this vitally important part of your business to.

Before committing yourself to a development company, you need to evaluate them carefully against a set of selection criteria that gives you the ability to select the right team for your development project. The developer must know the most appropriate online technologies, understand your requirements and the purpose of your online presence, and know how to create a stunning and functional website or mobile app and make it work on all devices.

They should also have a sound knowledge of online and digital marketing concepts so that the site or app they build for you complies with the latest in online trends. This will help with the optimization for the search engines to ensure your site gets an effective amount of traffic that converts to revenue for your business.



This is a technical and specialised field and current web development and mobile app development have improved substantially. Understanding that web development is not limited to WordPress or Joomla is important as different web platforms are better suited to particular online web developments. Magento is used when building effective eCommerce websites while Laravel PHP Framework is better suited for online automation projects. Developers without the latest technical know-how may not be able to provide a product that will fulfill all your online requirements.

Above all, your website or the mobile app is going to be your face on the World Wide Web. Hence it must be built with an understanding of the latest design trends and must be able to incorporate the latest advancements in designing technologies, not only to look good but also to add the necessary elements to reach out to your target customers. User experience (UX) must be core to your development.

Although there is an additional cost when using specialist platforms and UX expertise but is money well worth spending but only after you have tested the market with a minimum viable product.

Some of the characteristics of good web and mobile app development are:

- They take their time to understand your requirements and listen to your ideas
- The team is locally based. That doesn't mean the developers need to be locally based but the people managing the project need to be locally based to ensure clear communications are maintained
- They know digital marketing and know how to market your business ideas through your online presence
- They design and develop your website by including the best CMS available for easy content management
- They design the website that is compatible with all devices and adds the required degree of responsiveness to the website
- They have many live websites in their online portfolio that you can check up on to access their experience and level of professionalism in design and development
- They must have long standing experience in the web and mobile app development industry
- They should not only design with UX and appeal in mind. They should also design for good conversions by implementing the proper layout, navigation and calls to action

- They should have worked in various industries to demonstrate their ability to provide versatile and exclusive looking websites
- They must have wide exposure by designing for various audiences. Ideally they should have designed for local businesses as well as for those operating in the national and international markets.
- They must be able to provide a modern looking website
- They quote a price that you consider appropriate for the nature of work they have undertaken to do
- They understand we live in a mobile world and developing with mobility is at the centre of their design understanding.

It is hard to find a web designer/ mobile app developer satisfying all the above. After you have shortlisted the most probable development companies and have filtered them with some clear buying questions to find the best fit for your project, don't be afraid to ask additional questions to select your best to partner.

➤ **Can you do this project for me within the scheduled time frame?**

This is the starting point of your discussion with the development team. This question will help you understand their resource and availability and that if they intend to become your development partner, they will need to do their best in creating the right online presence to your business.

➤ **How long have you been in business?**

This will let you understand the industry experience of the developing team; the longer the better, as they would have got experience in working on various website and mobile app development projects covering various industries.



➤ **What is the process you are going to implement for the development?**

You need to know the preparedness and the plan the developer has for building your website or your mobile app. Pay attention to how they can implement their plan. Here their experience will play a great role as an experienced developer will have a ready made project plan. They will know how to approach your set of requirements and take them to a higher level of execution through a well-founded step by step process. The answer to this must be convincing and give you confidence as this is a key factor in your decision to contract a developer.

➤ **How many relevant references of your past clients can you give me?**

Past clients can give the right type of input and comments on the way in which the development team has worked on their projects. They can tell you how their requirements were implemented on the website or mobile apps and whether they are satisfied with what they got for the price paid and the level of satisfaction they enjoyed with the team. Do not hesitate to talk to as many of them as possible to know the work standard and the expectations you can have of the development team.

➤ **When can you start my project?**

A designer or a developer who is committed to other projects will ask for some time to begin working on your site. If they say that they can begin working immediately, you have to be wary about the work they are already doing as a busy developer or his team will not be waiting idly to take on your project immediately.

➤ **Will they do the entire work themselves or outsource it to other companies?**

This is important as most of the time, development companies have running arrangements with other companies that may have inferior standards to work for them. Though it is not possible to do the entire range of things that are necessary for completing a project in-house, you must know what are the requirements that will be outsourced and the ones that will be done by them. This will be a clear indication that the developer is facing a shortage of required skill sets or wants to cut costs.

➤ **What is their offer for site or app maintenance post-launch?**

Most of the developers include a complete maintenance package for a certain period of time after the launch and this will be included in the overall cost of the Site/ App development. However some other companies do not do so and may even want to enter into a separate contract for maintenance. You need to know in order to decide based on your specific requirement.

➤ **How will they ensure on- time and on budget launch of the project?**

This will ensure that they have a solid execution and implementation plan that will help them complete the website and mobile app work on time for the set launch date. As this is an essential part of the development work you need to pay attention to this and their response. Higher priced developments will accept penalties for overdue developments.

➤ **Will there be any copyright or other legal problems with respect to the site or app files received?**

The design and development of the website or the mobile app involves using many elements that may belong to third parties. The designer and developer must be very cautious in the materials they are using in your site so that none of them infringes any copyright or other legal matters. This will protect you against future possible litigation.

➤ **Will I get all the original files?**

Usually a development company completes the project and uploads them to the server, and does not give the original files to the buyer. In this case if issues arise and you need to fix them, you will not be able to get the original files. To avoid this you have to get all the original files from the developer soon after the launch of the site. These are only some of the general questions that will help you decide the suitability of the development team for your website or mobile app project and will help you ascertain how the company will respond to requests and help you bring your business idea to life and take it to the world.



HOW TO CHOOSE THE RIGHT CRM APPLICATION FOR YOUR BUSINESS

Many businesses start using Excel as their CRM but if they are serious then a CRM is required from day one. It doesn't have to be complex, just enough to manage a sales funnel, track leads, prospects, opportunities to close and clients for relationship management. It needs to provide task and calendar management and provide the ability to integrate with your website for lead generation and autoresponder functionality.

Start with a simple and free CRM site. You can export to a more advanced CRM when you are ready.

The CRM systems have evolved enormously from a humble contact management service to a robust tool with the ability to deal with all areas of a modern day business including the sales cycle management, integrated digital marketing processes, point of sale accounts, general accounting, vendor management and dealing with many other forms of operational data. This versatile tool is the most vital part of your business tools that can take care of your entire business operations.



It is vital you understand what you want from your CRM and that it is flexible enough to change as your business evolves. When selecting a CRM for your business, exercise caution and select the one that is good for your business. It is easy to waste a lot of time moving from one CRM to another if features, benefits and price points don't align. The application you buy for your business must at a very basic level be able to nurture leads, follow up your prospects and process your sales funnel and help you achieve more sales with efficient management of your leads. It should be able to store vital and key customer data provide easy customer management and promote consistent customer engagement as well as increasing customer loyalty and growing customer value.

After you have selected the right CRM software, it will provide the tools to enhance sales and help you design and run marketing campaigns. When investigating a CRM service provider take the following requirements into account before you make the final decision:

- **Generating leads for your business:** The CRM should have the right features to capture new customers from social media, visitors to your website, telephonecalls, sign-ups to your forum and newsletter etc though integrating services.
- **Follow up and nurture:** The CRM must provide the ability to send follow up emails or SMS messages to your customers at preset intervals to maintain your relationships and generate more sales.
- **The CRM should include:** Features like email templates, SMS messaging capabilities and effective project management tools besides having the capability to track and forecast sales.
- **E-commerce integration:** If you are running an E-commerce business it must come with its own E-commerce application and should be able to integrate seamlessly with other E-commerce service providers
- **Reports:** Reporting capability is essential within the CRM to measure sales funnels provide revenue projections and highlight areas of concern affecting expenditure and cash flow.
- **Call-center feature:** If you want to do telephone marketing to promote your products your CRM should come with an integrated Call center module.
- **Workflows and task management:** the CRM application must be able to track and take care of your workflows as well as to manage tasks and appointments on a day-to-day basis.

During the process of selecting the right CRM for your business, ask these questions to ensure you get the answers you need so you can consider them before taking the final decision:

➤ **Is it built for small to medium-sized business?**

When a CRM is specifically built, it should come with all the special features you require for a small to medium-sized business but with an ongoing cost advantage in pricing.

➤ **What is the implementation process like and how much technical assistance is included?**

This gives you an idea of what the implementation process will be and how you will be able to educate your staff and help with operational issues during the initial phase.

➤ **How easy is it to use? Can I easily train employees?**

This tells you how user friendly the CRM is and how much learning is necessary for the staff to get accustomed to the new system.

➤ **Are there any user and usage minimums?**

If the costing is based on subscription this will let you know what the annual minimum amount payable by you will be.



➤ **How easy is it to integrate with other solutions I already use?**

This will show you how the CRM will work with third-party applications and how it will integrate with your systems to see if you have to make any changes to the way you operate if you use this CRM.

➤ **What is the total cost of the software?**

This is the total price you need to pay for the CRM including software purchase, monthly subscription, implementation charges, hosting and back up fees, support level charges and custom change fees.

➤ **Are there any setup or additional fees?**

Always ask this at least a couple of times and get it in writing to discover any additional amounts you need to pay that may not have been disclosed.

➤ **What if I need to add more users or integrations?**

This relates to scaling up of the CRM for additional users. Is there a per-user charge?

➤ **Is the Application Programming Interface (API) accessible?**

This will show you how you can extend the use of the CRM and make it work along with other applications.

➤ **What type of security features are built in?**

This will demonstrate how safe and secure the CRM is and confirm how your business data will be handled by the CRM.

Get the answers to these questions and consider them carefully before taking the final decision to select the CRM so that your business is able to move on to the next stage of your business journey.

QUESTIONS YOU NEED TO ASK WHEN BUYING A CONFERENCING SYSTEM

Meetings are an integral part of business. With advancements in technology relating to audio, video and web conferencing you can access the type of set up that best suite your business. There are many vendors available so you need to be careful to choose the service that best fits the activities of your business. Audio is simple and used either stand-alone or in conjunction with webinars and web conferencing. Applications range from investor relations calls to organisations where key constituents are geographically challenged.

The line between web conferencing and video conferencing is becoming blurred through technology advancements through the key purpose for each remains core to their use.

Traditionally the primary purpose of web conferencing has been to provide tools for document, file share and project collaboration requirements as opposed to video conferencing where the main purpose is to replicate a face-to-face meeting over geographically separated areas.



Skype For Business provides the ability for up to 25 participants to join a call. This is probably enough for small to medium enterprises but, if you operate a branch network, require secure conference calls, advanced conferencing management features or require the best participant involvement over 10 participants or your internet bandwidth is not reliable, you should be looking at a professional conferencing service.

Here are questions you should ask yourself and any potential provider when selecting a vendor for your audio conferencing. This will also help profile your conference requirements for budgetary requirements.

➤ **What benefits would my business achieves by using Audio conferencing?**

Understanding the advantages of audio conferencing for your business will help you calculate the ROI and confirm whether audio conferencing is a viable option for your business.

➤ **What areas of the business require audio conferencing capability?**

This helps define the broad use of conferencing and the constituents that use the service.

AUDIO CONFERENCING

➤ **What localities are toll- free number services available for?**

This will indicate the footprint of the service provider and their ability to deliver standard services on an international basis.



➤ **How many local and international dial-in numbers can be integrated into the system?**

This indicates the capacity of the audio conference service for large scale investor relations calls and large townhall meetings.

➤ **How long can an audio meeting last?**

Some audio conference services limit the length of conferences. This needs to be clarified so calls are not terminated prematurely.

➤ **How many people can attend the audio conferencing at one time?**

This gives the maximum number of participants in an audio conferencing and is vital if you want to hold audio meetings with a large number of people at the same time.

Other standard questions are:

- Will each of the users will be provided with a personal conference ID?
- Is it possible to use audio conferencing with a web meeting broadcast?
- Is operator assistance available during an audio meeting?
- How does a moderator change his conference ID?
- What are the options and dial commands available to the users in the meeting?
- How do you schedule an audio meeting?
- Do you provide conference recordings?



VIDEO CONFERENCING

The main purpose of video conferencing is to hold meetings for individuals that are separated by distance but require the unique understanding which only comes from meeting face-to-face. The cost of travel especially when regular meetings are required is cost-prohibitive.

This helps business engage more effectively with your customers and gives them the best possible service. You can either go for a cloud-based video conferencing system or an on-premises self-hosted system.

When selecting a video conferencing system, you should get the answers for the following questions to find out the best service and its suitability for your business:

➤ **How many people can join the video conference at one time?**

This will help you know the capacity of the video conferencing system and understand the split screen capacity.

➤ **What kinds of equipment are needed on my side to conduct video conferencing?**

This lets you know the video equipment you need on your premises (called video Endpoints) that are necessary for conducting video conferences.

➤ **What are the locations where video conferencing services can be utilised by my employees and my customers?**

The answer to this question will give you the flexibility of the system and its efficiency to use from different locations and different scenarios. It will also help with the video conference budget. Mobility also comes into question where laptops may be the best endpoint for a sales force.

➤ **Can your service be used as a part of our existing audio meeting or the web conferencing systems?**

This demonstrates the ability of the video conferencing system to be integrated into your existing communication and conferencing systems.

➤ **What additional resources are needed to run your video conferencing service?**

This provides a list of resources like extra bandwidth, extra network capacities or extra equipment needed to conduct video conferencing.

➤ **How user-friendly is your system to communicate with video or with a combination of video and audio?**

It is vital that you get a system that is easy to use and easy to train those who are going to use it.

➤ **Who are the people with whom I can hold a video conference?**

This lets you know the reach of the video conferencing service within the business as this determines the effectiveness of your video conferencing services.

WEB CONFERENCING

Web conferencing is a vitally important communication facility for a business that wants to provide better customer service, improve the quality of their communications with all constituents and substantially improve the collaborative effectiveness for projects attended by remote participants. Here are a few questions to help qualify potential service providers:

➤ **What are the features my web conferencing system must have?**

You would be looking for things like file sharing, whiteboard availability and web-based audio or combining web with audio conferencing. Often web services are provided free if you use audio conferencing.



➤ **Can I use VoIP as the medium for my web conferencing?**

This will let you know the ability of the system in using VoIP for voice communication and its ability to integrate with your current VoIP set up on your premises without having to go for separate VoIP or other voice-based communication set up for this service.

➤ **Is the system capable of customisation at my end?**

This will let you know the customisability of the web interface where you can establish your brand in all the web conferencing portals.

➤ **How secure is the system?**

As internet services are vulnerable to cyber-attacks, the system must be secure enough to safeguard your business data and the information that is exchanged through your web conferencing service.

➤ **How mobile is your service?**

This will let you know the ability of the system to be used with mobile devices and the level of mobility available.

These questions will help you find the best conferencing solution for your company. You should understand how important the meetings are for the success of your business and the vital role played by communication services.

ESSENTIAL BUSINESS MESSAGING QUESTIONS

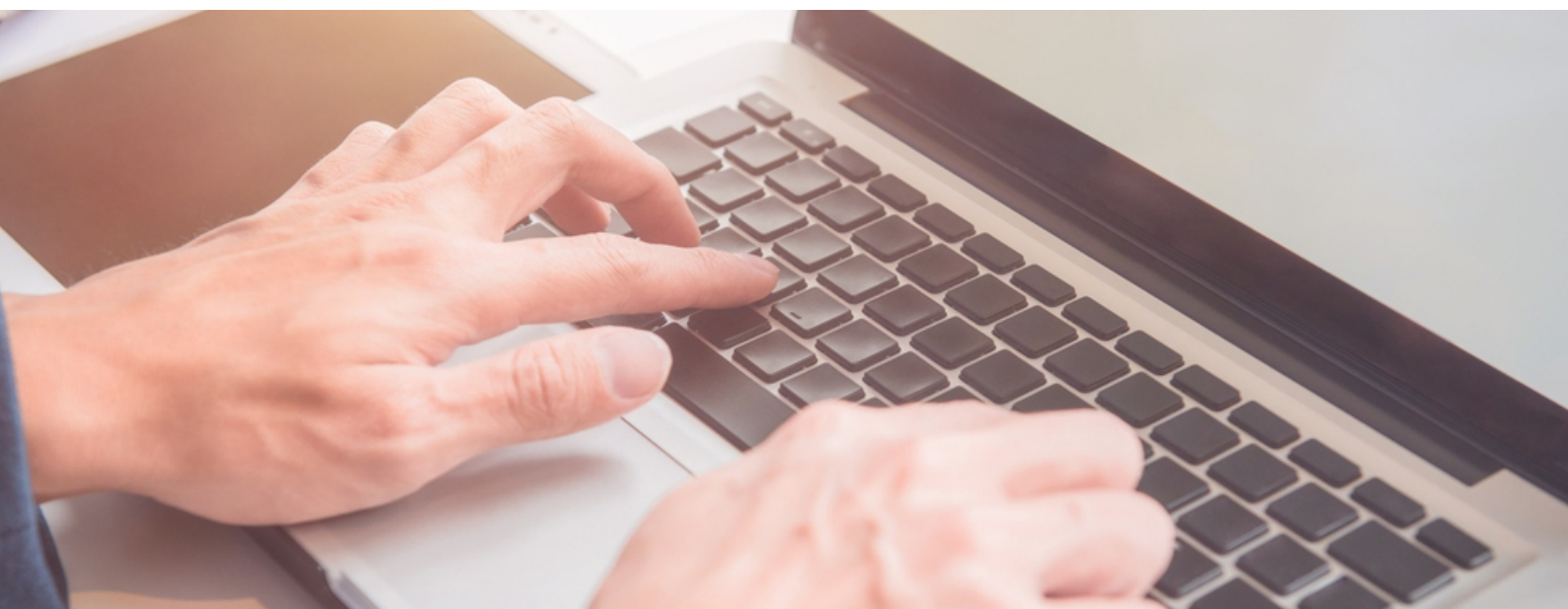
The most important questions to ask when looking at business messaging is:

Will a messaging application solve a problem and result in an increase in revenue, reduce expense, improve cash flow and ensure customer satisfaction? The application of messaging services is key to their effectiveness.

When addressing expense, cash flow and customer satisfaction remember that this is where your profit starts so any application that will improve these areas will directly affect your bottom line and, if you are not using communication applications, then you are probably leaving money on the table and not in your pocket.

I've included a sample communications applications matrix below for a helicopter view of application solutions.

You know your industry, you know your business offering; look at your own business process and think about how you can communicate more quickly, more effectively and cheaper.



What problem might be on your desk right now?

- Overdue accounts are putting pressure on you?
- Are you looking for better ways to communicate with your key stakeholders?
- You need an alert system if your IT goes down?
- Communication processes are manual and slowing you down?
- Need to build better feedback capabilities for your clients?
- People just don't turn up for appointments costing you money?
- Sending daily price updates needs fixing?
- Sending daily or weekly specials to your members?

Applications Matrix									
Applications	Broadcast SMS	Auto SMS	Email to SMS	Broadcast Voice	Auto Voice	Email to Voice	Email to Fax	Fax to Email	Auto Fax
Payment Reminders	X	X	X	X	X	X			
Reduce Call Centre Costs	X	X	X	X	X	X			
Improve Debt Collection	X	X	X	X	X	X			
Roster Notifications	X	X	X	X	X	X			
SMS to HTML Landing Pages	X	X	X						
SMS Payment Services	X	X	X						
Member Organisation Announcements	X		X	X		X			
Election Broadcasts	X			X		X			
IT System Alerts	X	X	X	X	X	X			
Large Scale Community Alerts	X			X					
Real Estate Weekend Follow Up	X		X	X		X			
Agri-Business Daily Rates	X		X	X		X			
Community Announcements	X		X	X		X			
Event Reminders	X		X	X		X			
Event Promotions	X		X	X		X			
Mortgage Application								X	
Restaurant Booking Reminders	X	X	X	X	X	X			
Medical Appointment Reminders	X	X	X	X	X	X			
Customer Satisfaction Survey	X			X					
Invoice Delivery							X	X	X
Send Purchase Orders							X	X	X
Send Remittance Statements							X	X	X

Sample Communications Application Matrix

CASH FLOW AND OVERDUE MESSAGING

SERVICES

If you have a large or growing overdue payment problem, this is often a case of just not having processes in place which will remind people to pay their bill. You may just want to email or SMS out of your accounting package reminder a few days before the due date.

Questions that may help other aspects of your business could be:

➤ **Apart from SMS do you provide any other messaging capability (possibly Text to Speech (TTS))?**

This will open up the possibility to send text to voice messages that can call either land lines or mobile numbers with a voice message. Using IVR, the recipient can be asked to select a number to speak to an operator or pay the bill via an online payment gateway. This also substantially improves the number of calls you can make as you are only dealing with inbound responses to outbound messages.

➤ **Can you make voice calls using a recorded wav. file?**

While TTS has improved amazingly, this provides much better call quality.

➤ **Can you insert variable data into an SMS?**

Inserting variable data personalises the call, maximising positive call responses.

➤ **Can you insert variable data into a TTS service?**

Inserting variable data can validate the person on the other end of the phone and personalizes the call maximizing positive call responses.

➤ **Can you validate a called recipient via data matching?**

Validating a person is vital, remember that no personal details can be provided.

➤ **Can you automate calls or SMS with an API?**

Automating messaging streamlines the process, improving productivity.

Basic questions

- **Can you send email to SMS?**

If a system can generate an email reminder, then an E2SMS can be generated out of an operating system such as SAP.

- **Can you send email to voice?**

If a system can generate an email reminder, then an E2SMS can be generated out of an operating system such as SAP.

- **Can you cascade message based on urgency i.e. for a sent SMS with no response automatically send a TTS call?**

This can be used to escalate collection stages which substantially improves cash flows. Look for a voice and SMS message broadcast service provider as an all-in-one solution provider.

It is important you understand the difference between business grade SMS messaging and the grey market where delivery is not reliable. If you are sending a marketing message then a failure rate at a higher percentage is expected and the price per message is low but for messages that need to be delivered then use a business grade provider to ensure you get value for money.

Further questions to ask your SMS provider are:

- **Can you prioritise SMS messages so urgent messages can be delivered immediately and are not "stuck" in the queue?**

This relates to the throughput of your messages. If they require immediate delivery you do not want to be stuck in a queue.

- **Do you provide mobile numbers for inbound SMS?**

This is used for inbound SMS campaigns.

- **What sort of reporting do you provide?**

Do they provide online reporting, delivery reports to your email and show pending and sent Reports?

- **Do you provide an online web portal for broadcast services?**

This is a simple website that allows you to upload a list of recipients in Excel/CSV and SMS a message with or without variables, sent either scheduled or for immediate send and report back on the success rate.

➤ **Pricing indicator**

For most business grade service providers, the cost per SMS starts at 10c for small volumes to 6c per message for large volumes. A small volume for an SMS provider is about 5,000 messages. HTML5 links could cost 10c when used.

➤ **Do you charge for delivery receipts?**

Some providers charge low send rates but then charge for extras like delivery receipts.

➤ **Can you schedule message delivery?**

Check that they can schedule a message to be sent up to 2 to 4 weeks in advance to create full messaging campaigns.

➤ **Do you provide number washing against the Do Not Call Register (DNCR)?**

If you send marketing messages, you must wash your list with the DNCR so you don't breach standards.

➤ **Do you provide online or response based opt-out services?**

An opt-out capability is essential either by inserting a keyword to stop receiving messages or by directing a recipient to a website where they can optout.

➤ **Do you provide an HTML5 platform to build a trackable landing page for mobiles for an advanced graphics experience?**

Some service providers offer the ability to build HTML5 landing pages for mobile. This sends an SMS with a shortened trackable link to the landing page you have created for surveys, real estate follow up, payment gateways, etc.



An example of an application for advanced SMS is Net Promoter Scoring (NPS). Customer satisfaction is important because it provides marketers and business owners with a metric that they can use to manage and improve their business.

➤ **Automated SMS streamlines NPS**

NPS is a customer loyalty metric developed by Fred Reichheld, Bain & Company and Satmetrix Systems. It was introduced by Reichheld in his 2003 Harvard Business Review article "One Number You Need to Grow". NPS can be as low as -100 (everybody is a detractor) or as high as +100 (everybody is a promoter). An NPS that is positive (i.e., higher than zero) is good, and an NPS of +50 is excellent.

Some of the advantages of using an SMS NPS solution include:

- Maximising the response rate compared to email or phone calls
- Automating the process, saving time and effort collating results and calculating the NPS
- Providing real-time access via the dashboard to NPS scores, compare individual and group performance at a glance
- Responding immediately to customer feedback, good and bad
- Integrating with your existing NPS dashboard system.

VOICE OR TEXT TO SPEECH (TTS)

MESSAGING SERVICES

Voice messaging is very effective whether to many or just one recipient.

Some questions to ask are:

➤ **Can you use the service to help websites become more accessible?**

This is often mandatory for some government departments and valuable to the community.

➤ **Can you use TTS to scrape text from online displays?**

This can be used for areas such as airport arrivals/departures boards to send updates to individuals or even provide an 1800 dial-in service to hear the information.

➤ **Can you use voice messaging in call centres to read out contract conditions?**

You can transfer a call to a voice platform to auto read disclosure statements then after selecting 1 number to confirm agreement you are transferred back to the call center. Saves time and optimises agent workloads.

➤ **Can you send voice broadcasts?**

In this busy world, sometimes it is easier to have news updates pushed to you on a regular basis or participate in surveys, hear a motivational message etc.

➤ **Can you send alternative messages?**

You can send voice messages with an alternative script if it goes to voicemail. This can be a human voice or text to speech, depending on if you need to incorporate variable data into your message or need keypad entry to validate a recipient's identity for privacy purposes.

➤ **Can you automate services to send alerts if an IT system fails?**

When messaging SMS notifies and voice alerts. Consider the required response time to decide which medium you use - or use both for maximum effect.



ESSENTIAL MANAGED IT QUESTIONS

MANAGED IT QUESTIONS

Managed IT services refers to the outsourced management of organisation IT infrastructure. The actual provision of IT services is often included as part of the Managed IT environment.

The way services are delivered and managed is moving from in-house solutions to cloud-based solutions that encompass remote access and management of on-premises infrastructure to managing an IT infrastructure environment that resides entirely in the cloud or a combination of both.

Outsourced service providers bring expertise and knowledge when it comes to the management of IT Services at all levels of a business, enabling them to transform organisations by improving the level of productivity of their workforce.

Managed IT services are able to deliver cost-saving cloud-hosted solutions that improve process efficiency and productivity.

The key questions to ask are:

➤ **Who will provide the service – the service provider or a third party?**

The answer to this will expose key competencies and possible roadblocks due to knowledge gaps.

➤ **What is your support structure?**

This will provide you with escalation points if required. It will also expose limited support resources.

➤ **What is your response time?**

This is critical. If your system goes down, you need to know your provider will be there for you.

➤ **What reporting do you provide and how often do you provide it?**

While you outsource your IT you need to know what your providers is doing, what is happening with your infrastructure and costs and most importantly use this so you can monitor their value proposition.

➤ **What technologies are you accredited to work with?**

This is important as your service provider needs to be accredited across a number of technology platforms to provide you with services and up-to-date licenses.

➤ **Can you provide references to other clients you can speak with?**

It is your responsibility to check all references.

➤ **What services in the technical environment do you not support?**

This is an important question in case it exposes deficiencies in their offering.

➤ **What security protection is provided for remote access or Desktop as a Service (DaaS)?**

It is essential you have an idea of the security provisions a provider will employ to protect your infrastructure and data.

➤ **What services will be provided? (based on the table below)?**

The table provides an overview of what a Service Provider can offer

Services available from a managed IT provider are:

REMOTE & ON SITE IT SUPPORT
Resolve PC & Mac workstation issues including anti-virus
Manage network: basic router, WIFI and switches
Manage printing
Manage internet domains and DNS
Manage email
New employee IT onboarding

process
Implement Backup 3-2-1
Strategy
Manage servers including regular log checks and security patching
Management of Microsoft Licensing
Relevant support for third party line of business applications including phone systems / VoIP services.
Backup Monitoring & Reporting
Manage and Maintain UPS
Manage thin clients
Manage inter-office WAN
Manage Cloud Services
Manage a private cloud environment
Manage a public cloud environment
Manage Internet Broadband
Manage complex networks (e.g. VLANs, WIFI mesh)
Manage servers including regular log checks and security patching
Manage smart phones & Tablets

FINALLY

Don't be afraid to ask questions

The starting point to any questioning is asking yourself WHY? What is the problem you are looking to solve? Is there actually a problem or just not understanding what is going on.

Educate yourself so you don't spend valuable time and resources looking to solve a problem that isn't there with the ever-changing world we live in while reading and informing yourself is important, look for expertise outside your organisation to find better ways to do things.

Hiring a consultant to **investigate areas on your company processes** is an investment but often not an option for those with a limited budget.

Ask what you want and use this information and sites like Commscloud.com.au as a reference point. They could mean the difference between staying in business and being left behind.