

Responding to the SMEs Call for Inputs: Agritron Ltd

Title:

Mr

Forename:

Harry

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Representing:

Organisation

Organisation (if applicable):

Agritron Ltd

Question 1: What are the communications needs of SMEs and how may these differ by: business size, sector and business model, location, other relevant factors?:

Contact with customers is available continuously but it still allows a response to be delayed to suit the convenience of the person called. That way a considered response is obtained which is often much better than that achieved by a phone call. The same works in reverse with suppliers.

Electronics moves quickly and without pause. One chip I work with currently has a data sheet 625 pages long and I can get upgrades from Texas in seconds. E-versions of magazines keep me in touch without creating a mountain of paper.

Without decent broadband all these things just take a lot longer to do.

Question 2: How do the needs of SMEs for communications services differ from (a) residential consumers and (b) large enterprises?:

Domestic use of communications is largely about convenience or just entertainment with the exception of a 999 call. I think small operations are much more reliant on communications. Up to a point we operate very close to "just - in - time " because many products we buy in can one be manufactured in huge quantities and therefore we have to buy those from stockists. The practicality depends on communications that work. The cost saving in just in case" inventory is very important.

Large companies have the buying power to manipulate all that. Communications must be just as important but will be "bent" to meet individual preferences.

Question 3: What are the types and degree of network availability issues that affect SMEs, for example issues with specific locations or services and what is the effect of these issues on SMEs? businesses?:

My business needs an internet connection at 8 Megabits or more that I can trust and is reliable. BT business does seem to respond to problems as well as can be expected. We also need a home for the company web site. Landline phone is naturally available alongside the broadband. As most of our output goes into equipment built by other manufacturers our need to travel is minimal and so our use of mobiles is also minimal.

Question 4: What opportunities do communications providers see in serving the SME market and how are these evolving as a result of developments in technology and infrastructure?:

This can be confusing as well as un-nerving. There is money to be made and so lots of ideas float about. The biggest currently so far as communications are concerned is computation in the cloud. It is far from clear how secure that is for small companies. Nevertheless it is the raw speed of today's processors that make all this a practical reality. The question becomes, how much of it is useful for me?

Question 5: How far does the choice, quality and price of products in the retail market meet the needs of SMEs?:

There is a lot of choice in all aspects if you know where to look. Perhaps most important is backup service when there is a problem. In particular some broadband providers appear to be very happy to take money but are not as helpful as expected when there is a problem.

Question 6: Are there challenges for communications providers in targeting the SME sector, and do these vary by geography, SME size and SME sector?:

With the roll out of fibre any answer to this one will change by the hour. But there will still be a question about how far from an exchange will fibre be available /

Question 7: Are there issues facing retail providers in engaging with wholesale providers in order to offer retail products which meet the needs of SMEs?:

This is outside of our area

Question 8: How far does the quality of service delivered by communications providers meet the needs of SMEs?:

The question is of service backup and of recovery time when there is a line fault. Reports vary very widely from provider to provider.

Question 9: What issues face SMEs in ensuring that they have appropriate SLAs and are able to gain redress when quality of services falls below the standards expected?:

That's the old chestnut about off-shore call centres. My experience of such things is not good.

Question 10: What products and service enhancements are available, at what indicative price points, to deliver on SMEs? quality of service needs (e.g. in terms of technical product characteristics or fault resolution)?:

Varies from provider to provider

Question 11: What information is available to SMEs to enable them to select communications services appropriate for their business needs? Please identify any additional information or measures which you consider would enhance transparency for SMEs and your reasons for this view?:

Our experience of BT is that they respond well. I challenged the performance of our router recently and was immediately sent a replacement that was fully pre-programmed.

Question 12: What factors do SMEs take into account when they are considering changing their communications service or provider? Please identify any that you consider may deter SMEs from switching and your reasons for this view.:

Try telling a provider you wish to change!

Question 13: What evidence is there of issues where bad practices by communications providers causes harm to SMEs?:

I think this is where the question is one of backup response

Question 14: Are there any other issues in relation to the provision of communications services to SMEs, or SMEs? experience of these services, which you consider should be included within our assessment?:

Reliability is fundamental. So the service has to work properly out of the box and service response has to be meaningful and effective

Question 15: For any issues identified in response to any of the questions above do you have any views on how they may be resolved?:

In theory the market place should sort things out. The reality is that people get hurt in to process. So better information is always a good idea.