

Responding to the SMEs Call for Inputs: RetroMarques Ltd

Title:

Mr

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Representing:

Organisation

Organisation (if applicable):

RetroMarques 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?:

Communication needs:

1. Telephony
2. Email (person to person and e-newsletter to many)
3. Cardnet type machines
4. Alarm systems
5. Internet access (news, information, searches, data transfer and backup, data sharing {internal to business and external to clients])

I suggest many of not all businesses need access to these services but the scale of the need will vary depending on size of business (employees and client numbers) and sector (data hungry/intensive or not).

Business model will also drive needs due to: single/split locations, mobile working needs, modern or conventional working practices, client base (type, age, tech savvy)

One other relevant factor will be the local, regional, national, international type of business and client base. The broader the client base the greater the need for communications.

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

- a. Reliability is vital, security is critical, data backup and integrity is much more important. Networked and/or dispersed collaborative working will be much more important.
- b. Greater need for simple, cheap but effective comms systems. Often self-maintained, probably also installed as COTS or COTS-derived systems (h/w and s/w). Unlikely to have in-house IT/comms department/specialist(s) and more reliant on tech-savvy multi-tasking management individual e.g. Director.

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?:

SMEs far more likely to be located in smaller, less business-specific locations and therefore less well provisioned for good comms e.g. our own business park (WR8 9JZ) has virtually no broadband (ordinary not superfast!) and is rural in nature, therefore also lagging behind in (for example) 4G provision.

Effect is constant struggle for internet access, email connectivity (and file size transfers) and inability to move to network-based (cloud etc) infrastructure and working environment.

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?:

I'm not sure comms providers see an opportunity as I perceive a general feeling of 'small is unimportant' and/or low density business users = unimportant!

I sense that 4G will be the saving grace for many of us where landline broadband is very poor - we'll simply ditch landline comms and go mobile.

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

Choice, quality and product is all driven by 'big business' and consequently also the big providers, such as BT, who don't really seem to care about SMEs.

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

Two challenges: delivering at a price point and delivering the service in SME business locations.

Both can be overcome - assuming there is a will to do so!

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?:

N/A to my sector

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

Mobile telephony/comms, not at all bad but in general coverage is still way too hit and miss. You cannot drive from Bristol to Gloucester on the M5 and have a continuous business discussion/conversation en-route - how appalling is that? This does of course apply for all users and not just SMEs!

Quality of broadband is as described before - very poor.

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?:

'SLAs' do not seem to apply so much as a contract! It is all very well promising a service (many do) but the reality is that when a service is not provided or fails it is the business that suffers and redress simply doesn't help.

I want a good service and not cash or discounts when it fails - that doesn't help the efficiency and effectiveness of the business!

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)?:

Our main issue is with broadband provision to the office/workshop.

We could pay for a satellite based system but the startup fee and monthly service fees do not justify the benefit for a small, cash-strapped business.

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?:

I'm not sure very much information is available to businesses at all, really, other than so-called advice from a provider (biased) and possibly some advice from (for example) the FSB. A central advisory group whose role would be to understand a business's needs, recommend implementation of suitable systems and way of working.

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.:

1. Ease of transition.
 2. Finance - penalties, contract lock-ins, cost effectiveness of service.
 3. Reliability (and reputation).
 4. Is the provider local and do they care?
- All of the above may deter switching.

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

Not sure about this one. In our case the only obvious 'bad practice' I can cite is where we were sold broadband provision, bought the relevant equipment and then spent many days trying to get it all to work only to be told by a neighbouring business that there was no broadband available on site! Unbelievable!

Harm? Time wasted, money spent, business impacted.

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?:

Location can be important. I believe that we are suffering because we are just over the county border (in Worcestershire) yet the closest telephone exchange to us is based in Gloucestershire. Who cares, who does one challenge?

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?:

From Government to Provider, it is simply too little too late! Progress is being made but painfully slowly and other countries certainly put us to shame.

A switch to mobile roaming in the UK rather than being locked into a single contracted provider would almost certainly have the benefit of driving much better coverage by the network providers.

The Government could easily subsidise communications provision to smaller, probably more rural business sites and this should be provided as soon as a site builds; think of the difference it would make in enhancing the business park's potential and sellability, not to mention efficiency once established!