

Why Buying Self Service Off the Shelf Doesn't Always Work

Although some self-service applications can be standardized, a truly effective deployment often requires custom development or benefits from a “purpose built” principle.

By Richard Slawsky, with Craig Keefner
KioskMarketplace.com



Self-Service technology is more and more a critical component of a company's business plan. According to research firm Technavio, the global market for interactive technology is forecast to grow by as much as 15 percent a year by 2016.

Developing a strategy typically involves a long, costly planning process to establish the most effective way of converting more conventional mechanisms into customer self-service and how that impacts employees, your company's operations, not to mention hardware, application or infrastructure and software costs. So when a business looks for ways to manage initial up-front capital costs of a deployment, usually any hardware, software and/or application development is going to come under careful scrutiny.

But short-changing up front rarely results in an effective result later, and the project usually ends up costing much more down the road in terms of lost revenue or dissatisfied customers. In some corporate environments a manager's term might average 12 months before a new position and there can be the manager who starts the projects, then the manager who kills (or fixes) the project. Unless the self-service initiative is defined as short term in nature (e.g. Christmas promotion), off the shelf consumer-driven products will never be the best option. Short term is where optimizing costs via “distressed consumer inventory” can be a COGS opportunity, never in medium or long-term.

Deciding how to proceed

Self-service stations, whether tablet, mobile or terminals, are being deployed in industries ranging from retail to health care, offering services such as product information and ordering, bill pay and check-in. The applications are limited only by the imagination and budget of your company.

When it comes to converting to self-service, there are generally two ways that will be recommended to you on how to proceed: Adapting an off-the

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shelf “done before” unit to meet the end users’ needs or working with your partner firm to custom design a unit designed for a specific purpose.

Off-the-shelf “standard” metal kiosks are those that can be manufactured in anticipation of mass purchases. With metal kiosks this means lower metal costs for the manufacturer (if you use metal) and overall fewer processes and variables. Because those units are manufactured in bulk, they are typically less expensive than their custom counterparts. For a long time the standard was wood and particle board for conventional kiosks, then that became metal (16 gauge steel) and now that has started to evolve to lower cost materials, as well.

“Some types of units such as ATMs or point-of-sale terminals have a primary and definitive function, so it’s easy and fast to use those units in multiple environments,” said Craig Keefner, manager with Menomonee Falls, Wis., interactive solutions provider CTS. “On the other hand, try and add additional functions to those types of devices and suddenly transaction times slow down. Unless the additional transaction can be done in parallel the customer ends up asking why it took so long.”

But then consider how the advent of mobile O/S into POS systems is now providing an enhanced multi-threaded experience. The social connection frameworks for iPad and Android tablets allow for vendors such as Revel Systems, to query, in parallel, the social networks for any consumer reaction while it is still processing their order and/or payment. The end result is the restaurant gets an opportunity to proactively react to a positive or a negative review.

If the proposed application is one that isn’t already in widespread use, chances are an off-the-shelf unit will not fully address the potential deployer’s needs. Trying to shoehorn a standard unit with new ad hoc functions for which it wasn’t designed will almost always lead to less-than-satisfactory or marginal results. It is natural to try to take this approach. Ironically, your vendor will also tend to favor the fastest transaction and most times will support that point of view. That can be a sure sign that your vendor is more interested in your money than your success.

In addition, everything from the main interaction screen to accompanying digital signage and the kiosk enclosure, as well as the user experience itself, offers an opportunity to enhance the branding experience and even monetize that branding. A standard unit with some sort of vinyl decal can marginalize your brand (and in turn that brand’s profits). There can be specific regulatory standards in your market that benefit from more precise tar-



getting (or fitting). Better to protect your assets than to create liabilities. You can have existing “environments” where the self-service needs to be part of integrated design, not just an isolated, cold, sterile, stainless steel pedestal in the corner. In these scenarios a “fitted” self-service solution is in order.

Benefiting from the right partner’s experience

Rather than taking a standard consumer-driven product and trying to adapt it to a purpose for which it was not designed, the deployer can work with a full service design firm to come up with a solution that meets all their needs, not just the expedient initial cost equation. In addition, an experienced solutions partner works with you to evaluate the possibilities and determine the best way to accomplish the goals you have in mind.

While working with a custom solutions provider may cost a bit more up front, the long term savings both in terms of heartache and dollars can be immense. It can easily be 12 months before you can fully judge the value and the relationship. Does this provider have long term design relationships or do they just sell “that kiosk”?

Which partner to pick depends on the goal the end user hopes to achieve, and rating providers by their experience in similar projects is a key part of due diligence. The healthcare market has very specific characteristics, for example, while retail and banking have a different but equally important set of issues that come in to play. The same applies to any industry that may benefit from the use of self-service devices.

Your provider should offer a wide variety of form factors and materials. The older kiosk enclosure companies tend to work in metals and there is wider

Custom kiosks vs. off-the-shelf

OFF-THE-SHELF

Pros

- Low initial cost
- Faster deployment
- Standard design

Cons

- May not meet the deployer’s specific needs
- May not match the deployer’s branding efforts

CUSTOM

Pros

- Can be designed to meet specific needs
- Can be integrated with existing branding efforts
- Experienced kiosk design firm can help avoid costly missteps

Cons

- Higher cost
- Design process can take a significant amount of time.



About the sponsor:

The team at Connected Technology Solutions (CTS) has been providing interactive marketing solutions since 2002. The company is headquartered in Menomonee Falls, Wis., a suburb of Milwaukee, and operates satellite offices in Tampa, Fla., Denver and Chicago.

CTS long has been recognized for its outstanding creative talent and innovative engineering, garnering its team and clients a collection of the most prestigious awards in the industry. Clients include Johns Hopkins, Nemours, Cleveland Clinic, QuadraMed, Sears Holdings and Krogers.

cost delta between standard and custom. Complete solution providers work in multiple materials and the delta is much less.

Making use of that experience can help the deployer get the most out of the application they envision.

“Our partners benefit from us exploring and presenting various methods and ways the unattended or semi-attended processes can be used, and then matching that up with our customers point of view or the ‘sympathetic context’,” Keefner said. “By genuinely starting at the design phase we have the ability to tune the solution to each specific client. The priority is on the usage and relevance of the process versus trying to force a ‘one size fits all’ solution.”