

Picking a Self-Service Provider

The first step of the self-service journey starts with knowing where you want to go

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Increasing productivity, being able to scale up easily to provide more services AND higher levels of services is a crucial baseline for success. Self-service capability via any number of solutions is there to help.

The toolset includes displays, signage, fixtures, kiosk terminals, tablets, thin clients, mobiles, iPads, Androids, scanners, infrared sensors, proximity sensors, vending, checkout to check-in and more. Couple that toolset with additional interactive channels including mobile phones, scanners, the POS system, WiDi, 4G, WiFi and the list goes on.

“Moving forward, automation is going to be about cutting to the chase, skipping past laborious processes, to get us to the experience or the product more quickly,” said Richard Cope, director of insight and trends at Chicago-based research firm Mintel. “For companies this means offering a choice between human expertise and automated fast-tracking in service, and adding customer customization and artisan suppliers to the product supply line. Man and machine are not at war, and the challenge is to use automation as something that gives us more time to focus on being more human.”

A key question for any business though, is where to start. How do you choose a partner for your own particular self-service journey? Is the project a single-stage one-off, or is it a short-term near-term that has a big “tail?” Are there long term (3+ years) considerations?

“A good first step would be a needs analysis performed for your business/facilities and identify the potential and lost opportunities for self-service,” said Craig Keefner, manager with Menomonee Falls, Wis., interactive solutions provider CTS. “Hard to know which direction you can go if you don’t know where you are.”

Being able to identify, integrate, maintain and service these tools in your own personalized environment, decors and networks is the big challenge, Keefner said. It’s all supposed to work together - visually and functionally.

“Recalibrating your business processes so your customers are more easily and quickly served means deciding what is important to you,” Keefner said.





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“Going to the DMV to renew a license is much different from transforming a bank branch into a self-service environment. There are informational, transactional, and multi-discipline solutions.”

Once the parameters and opportunities are established, it's critical to work with an experienced provider that can help you develop and arrive at the solution that best matches your business objectives and goals. So, after doing some initial homework, the next step is picking a partner.

Some of the considerations:

Reputation

The best partner will be a reputable company. The kiosk space is small compared with many other industries so reviewing the industry sites should be an easy task. KioskMarketplace.com maintains a list of sponsors and the Kiosk Industry Group Web site has a working list of all the players (see Resources and Kiosk History at <http://gokiosk.net>).

Even then bear in mind that the natural tendency of companies is to overstate their capabilities. Florsheim introduced the first major kiosk project in 1985 and the first real electronic kiosk enclosure company Fatura was founded in 1986. If a company says they've been in the kiosk business for 50 years they are probably exaggerating.

Strengths

Are they a manufacturing partner or do you need more than that? Someone like Flextronics has supply chain advantages but even someone like that might team up with a smaller design firm such as CTS to develop the platform. Do you have special marketing requirements where multiple technologies need to be designed into environment? Those are special skills in addition to standard manufacturing.

Are you driven by function or solution? An operation that needs relatively simple information or transaction processes has different requirements than one needing multiple “solutions” in order to form a solution. Verizon Bill Pay kiosks are single-minded focus transactional units while CTS is working on a project with Sears that requires a combination of transactional and informational units in across multiple departments.

What market and environment are you operating in? Rating the providers by their experience in your market is due diligence. The healthcare market has very specific characteristics, for example. It has its own set of inherent liabilities that come into play just like retail and financial transactions. How up to date and experienced are they in your current market? Or are they just learning?



Some final thoughts

- Many providers will tell you they make almost everything. Be sure you are not paying to be their test subject.
- Never mind the list of bullet points or the endless powerpoint. Sometimes the more they defend, the more likely they have offended.
- Cheaper business class PCs sound nice but they tend to go End-Of-Life too quick. After 5th image in 2 years you'll ask yourself why you didn't use that industrial-class PC in first place.
- Are the components industry-approved stock components with certification labels and marks or are they piecemeal assembled and/or modified prior to integration? Make sure you can buy complete assembly off the shelf.
- Is the remote monitoring working, or are the devices just capable? Paper low and paper out are the killers.

Quality

Customer Recommendations – Who are their reference accounts and repeat customers? If a company is as good as they say it should be easy to get locations, numbers and names to verify their work.

Independent research - What industry research is there regarding that company and how they operate in your space? A good starting point is Kiosk-Marketplace and the Kiosk Industry Group at gokiosk.net.

Regulatory – how committed and resourceful are they when you look hard at the details? Here is where the words ADA, HL7, HIPAA, UL, and PA DSS have meaning. Asking if someone supports that is not the same as getting a product which includes that.

Components – Cheap anything comes with tradeoffs.

- Enclosures – Look inside a demo kiosk and, if you dare, run your fingers carefully along the enclosure. Can you really service the inside?
- Computers – is it a business- or industrial-class unit? Business class is cheaper but they break down more often. Solid state storage is affordable, more reliable, greener and by far the better option now.
- Displays & Touchscreens – The standard for the kiosk industry is the Elotouch 17xx and 19xx SAW. For 22-inch and larger displays you should be sure that the standard HD resolutions are supported by the monitor and by that PC/graphics.
- Keyboards – The best advice here unsurprisingly is to make sure your keyboard is made by somebody who makes keyboards. It sounds absurd but it's relevant unfortunately.
- Devices – Cheap devices have cost more money in more projects than any other element, Keefner said. Hitting a particular price point by using a cheap device now means they have to replace those devices more frequently later.

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 has long been recognized for its outstanding creative talent and innovative engineering, garnering CTS' team and clients a collection of the most prestigious awards in the industry, including Kiosk of the Year, Best Digital Signage, Best Gaming, four POPAI and four Design of the Times awards.