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Finding the kiosk sweet spot

[Natasha Royer Coons, TeraNova Consulting Group](#)
 • 13 Oct 2008

In the self-service supply chain, whether you are a manufacturer of kiosks, a software developer for self-service applications or a kiosk deployer, the question of how to deploy kiosks in third-party retail locations rapidly and cost-effectively becomes a concern. More specifically, during deployment, what is your connectivity strategy? How do you plan or help your customers prepare for supporting a multitude of applications without a time-consuming and costly network implementation?

The network itself is leveraged to support kiosk applications that range from the most basic and low-bandwidth applications such as monitoring uptime and remote desktop access to rich, multi-media applications that require enormous bursts of data — and, of course, the all-important transactional application of credit card processing that is low bandwidth but critically important both from a revenue and security perspective.

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As connectivity is essential, previous choices for kiosk networks entailed either 1) leveraging the retailer's own store network, or 2) bringing in your own hardline solutions such as DSL. DSL can be purchased via national aggregators for coast-to-coast deployments and are single carrier billed. But lower-cost DSL networks via the LECs (local exchange carriers) or Regional Bells have to be procured, billed and supported region-to-region across many carriers.

It is important to identify the right partner to support these types of labor-intensive hard-line deployments, which require the dedication of telecom-savvy project management resources through all the stages, but especially during the implementation at a third-party retail location where inside wiring is required to run the connectivity up to the kiosk.

Leveraging the in-store network, although alluring as it's "free," is filled with potential "gotchas." For the kiosk deployer, relying on the customer's network is difficult to support or manage as they have no control. For example, if the customer's IT department changed a port or altered a few firewall rules, the kiosks may not be able to connect anymore. This change may not have been communicated to the kiosk deployer. The result is that the kiosk is offline and not delivering services.

Many retailers do not want more circuits being dropped or wiring to be done for a kiosk solution. Many enterprise retailers demand that a kiosk deployer stay off of their store network because of security.

Self-service needs a connectivity model that does not rely on coordination with store managers and personnel.

Increasingly sophisticated cellular routing technology (3G routers) and the ability to leverage robust and somewhat ubiquitous networks via the predominant CDMA-based carriers such as Sprint and Verizon Wireless — building "kiosk wide area networks" leveraging wireless connectivity as the backbone — has now become a viable option. For example, with Sprint's REV A technology, peak download speeds are at 3 megs (equivalent to two T1's) and upload speeds of 1.8 megs are attainable. However it is better to plan the kiosk network and the ability to support your applications based on a more conservative approach of an average of 800kbps download and 400kbps upload.

Atlanta-based SoloHealth chose a wireless solution for its self-service eye-exam kiosks, currently piloted in some of the nation's largest retailers. Stephen Kendig, head of operations and development for SoloHealth, offered his thoughts about wireless connectivity.

COONS: What are the top three concerns you have as a kiosk deployer?

KENDIG: Our initial concerns deploying our kiosks were around consumer acceptance of the innovative technology and application that we were bringing to the market. After a few months and several thousand of users, it appears that we are really on to something. Once the consumer's need has been identified and met, ensuring that you have a stable platform is paramount. Without a stable platform, your solution may work, but it's not scalable.

COONS: How will or has wireless connectivity helped in reducing any of those concerns?

KENDIG: The cellular wireless connectivity solution that our wireless solutions provider advised us on has really helped to ensure that we have a stable platform. As with any new technology, remote diagnostics and continuous monitoring are critical to identifying and eliminating issues before they become rampant. Wireless connectivity allows us to test our kiosks in multiple locations in any store, and in almost any environment, without the limitations of a hard wire or limited range of small wireless networks.

COONS: Why did you consider using wireless connectivity to deploy the network in the first place?

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KENDIG: We made the decision based on three key factors. We didn't want to be reliant on our customers' infrastructure and potential IT concerns, we wanted maximum flexibility of where we could locate our kiosk within our different end environments, and we needed connectivity that was reliable and under our control.

COONS: How have you handled PCI and security concerns?

KENDIG: Our security concerns are managed through our leading kiosk software platform, the [Netkey](#) Runtime application. They have done a brilliant job of staying ahead of the potential hackers and bringing industry-leading technology to the kiosk space.

For Tom Weaver, chief marketing officer of Denver-based [KIOSK Information Systems](#), having a wireless solution available for clients has removed barriers to sales and driven additional turnkey values.

Jamie Cuthbert, president of Toronto-based Saitech International, and Roger Van Maris, Saitech's vice president, say it was important for their informational kiosks to provide consistent and top-quality experiences to the consumer and the sales associate who uses the kiosk to look up information in the tire center. In order to achieve this, the content needed to be timely and up-to-date, which required reliable and relatively unrestricted access to the kiosks.

"Wireless gave us the control over our kiosks without concern over infrastructure or security issues within a retailer's home network," Cuthbert said.

For Tim Walsh, chief executive of Ready Credit Corp., based in Eden Prairie, Minn., leveraging a wireless solution allowed for a rapid, non-intrusive and simultaneous deployment of multiple pilots with national retailers at an increased rate of 135 percent over hard-wired solutions for their financial services kiosks.

At the end of the day, no matter where the deployer sits in the self service ecosystem of suppliers, vendors and deployers, connectivity must come into play. Better to plan for it up front with telecom professionals and leverage the simplest and most cost-effective plan so that either the deployer's or the customer's kiosks aren't stuck in a corner gathering dust. Instead, they are mobile and can be easily positioned to leverage the sweet spot for the best foot traffic and the highest number of transactions.

Natasha Royer Coons is the managing director of TeraNova Consulting Group, which provides fully managed telecom solutions to the self-service and retail verticals.



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