



HELP YOURSELF?

A self-service portal has fast become the must have tool for suppliers wanting to attract and retain customers by extending their propositions through extended 'opening hours' or just speeding up the delivery mechanisms – the faster you can sell a service the quicker you can get the invoice issued. Comms Business looks at some of the key portals on the market in our sector.

A typical portal needs to enable users—whether they are customers, employees, suppliers, or partners—to simply perform high-value transactions, from routine account updates to paying bills, managing support tickets, and more.

Besides the value of driving down service costs, self-service portals are a progressively vital element of the customer experience. Customers seem to increasingly prefer to complete transactions themselves via the internet—whenever and wherever they want—rather than having to make a call or travel in person to a business location.

And since customer experiences are crucial to achieving competitive advantage, portals have become increasingly valued as service delivery tools.

How can firms realise the business value of their provisioning portals?

According to Aled Treharne, Director of Innovation and Development at Nuvias UC, customers are increasingly looking for automation and self-management to enhance their experiences and this can pose challenges for businesses who traditionally may not have this capacity.

“Self-service portals are of course of limited value when provided as a standalone portal –truly powerful experiences provide customers with an effective and comprehensive experience of all interactions with the business, integrating different systems and providing a unified view of their service. Personal shopping experiences with companies like Amazon have revolutionised what people have come to expect from self-service portals and this has a knock-on effect on the development effort and costs associated with building out your own systems.”

“In a connectivity market that can easily become commoditised, a highly capable portal becomes a key point of differentiation,” says Neil Wilson at Virtual1.

“Price may be the simplest point of comparison, but a poor order and service experience will live on far longer and cost far more both in terms of man hours involved and reputation.



Darren Garland,
Managing Director at ProVu

What makes a portal truly powerful is what is going on behind the scenes. How much are transactions automated. As much as 80% of our connectivity orders come through 1Portal, our own award winning Portal. This is no accident, and it is not because we push partners down that channel.

We have made it so straightforward to use that it becomes the obvious route. Not only have we made a quote easy to raise, and simple to convert quote to an order, we have also integrated 1Portal directly to our systems and our network partners too.”

Steve Glaister at InvoSys, says times are changing, and fast. “We’ve come to expect that if we want something doing, it gets done immediately. At InvoSys, we’ve always understood this and we’ve built our business around our self-service portals. The value that this brings to both our business – and our customer’s businesses – is huge. Our portal allows us to remain lean as team,

because as soon as we have trained our customers up, they can do 90% of the day to day tasks themselves. When the customer requires more input, we’ll offer them additional training so if a similar event reoccurs then they will have the tools to deal with it.”

Darren Garland, Managing Director at ProVu notes that committing to build a good provisioning platform is an expensive undertaking.

“To realise the value of that investment it has got to allow you to make efficiency savings and acquire new customers or retain existing ones, all of which will contribute to the overall return on investment. Furthermore, if you can also make it free up your team’s time to allow your staff to concentrate on adding value to customers rather than carrying out mundane order processing work, the perceived value from your customers is even more significant.

For us, our award-winning portal, ProSys accounts for a large proportion of our daily business – it plays a pivotal role in both our company and our customers’ processes. In the last 12 months alone ProSys has processed over 78% of our overall orders, freeing our team up to focus on other tasks.”

What does the channel want from a self-service portal?

Richard Thompson, Director of Partners at TalkTalk Business.

“We ran a series of focus groups with our partner community during the development of our MyNet portal that launched last year. In these interviews our partners were quite clear that they wanted a portal that’s simple to use and manages the end to end provisioning journey; from order to bill. It has to be streamlined and quick to use, so that it helps to reduce a business’s cost-to-serve. It also has to provide clear insight as to what is happening at each step of the journey, this enables them to better manage their own customer communication. For example, when quoting for a new Ethernet circuit, the portal needs to not only show the cost but also the complexity and indicative install dates, so customers’ expectations are set straight away.

Giving our Partners as much control as possible is vitally important. Organisations want to have the option to increase things like bandwidth or add resilience on their circuit without having to call us. By providing visible status updates and keeping all notes in one place it reduces admin time and ambiguity. The partner can see what we can see.”

Sasha Williamson, CEO of Luminet says that ultimately the channel wants portals that automate the right processes and technologies, to expedite their sales and keep costs down.

“Not all portals will be able to do this. For example, as we own our own core and wireless network, which enables delivery of our services, we can

WHAT PARTNERS WANT

Mike Wardell, Managing Director at cloud services company Giacom, says a provisioning portal is not only a necessary tool for Giacom’s channel partners, it’s a way to make provisioning cloud services easier.

“There’s no complicated structures to adding, modifying or removing services – it’s all done through a customer-centric journey that’s designed to help our partners keep all their customers in one place.”

Partners want:

- An easy way to provision cloud services
- A way to visualise their bill and drill down their data
- One single view to see all their customers
- One simple monthly bill
- Get all their information from one technical area
- The freedom to add, modify and remove services on their terms
- A way to scale easily, without complications
- Create tickets for technical issues and get support quickly

These needs are crucial to providing a superb service to the channel, says Wardell.

“Self-service provisioning portals often speak for themselves. In the SMB market, they are central to keep a business running smoothly as it enables our partners the freedom to work outside their normal hours. Like the cloud, it’s all about flexibility and scalability.



Carl Boraman, Commercial Director at Tollring

action requests directly and quickly. Other companies won’t be able to do this, as they do not own the network or technology.”

Exertis provides JEM, a provisioning tool which customers can use to take advantage of their ‘as-a-service’ portfolio.

Technical services director Ian Gilbey says, “More and more end users are looking to buy their software and use hardware on a needs basis scaling their requirements up and down accordingly. The tool provides resellers and managed service providers with full control of quoting and ordering. JEM is designed to be customer facing; resellers can build their monthly quote with the various products required, adjust margins to their liking by figure or percentage and export personalised quotations with their company’s letterhead. JEM is fully secured, meaning resellers can store customer information and references making it as useful as a CRM tool. All open quotes are assigned a unique reference number and saved for a later date, but resellers can add calendar reminders, attachments and notes for other colleagues. Once activated, it’s a case of clicking an order and their monthly billing begins on a pro-rata, direct debit basis.”

David Dadds, Managing Director VanillaIP, believes that as solutions include more and more elements (both voice and non-voice) the requirements to simplify the deployment and management becomes more and

more important, so the option of one size ‘Bundle’ fits all no longer works - typically because the commercial pricing makes it too expensive at the lower end.

“The concept of self service is well understood, but we believe there is a wider requirement here and that is the ability of the reseller to be able to effectively position the service in a way that the user can understand. We think the ability to create bundles in the first place is crucial to being able to deliver an effective self-serve portal experience.

The key requirement is that the portal unifies all customer touch points in the same place, in real-time. This must include call recordings, Analytics/Reporting, IP traffic monitoring, device registrations and configuration, all call centre reports and of course billing history. If the customer must enter more than one portal this is making the client experience less than optimal and will typically result in lost benefit of all data sets being in one place.

Our Uboss portal brings in data from multiple different sources, including PBX, connectivity and mobile GSM. All services and billing information are broken down by user level allowing resellers and customers to see a logical view of all services that have been deployed. Importantly for resellers this also means there is no disconnection between service provisioning and billing meaning that there is 100% accuracy and all services are being correctly charged for.”