

# Back to the Future for the Best IT Ideas of 2010

By Chad Paalman

**F**or most business owners, 2010 will not be the Year of the Life-Changing iPhone App. Likewise for the Year of the Netbook, or the Year of Google's Chrome operating system.

If 2010 is anything like 2009, chances are high that business owners will continue to wrestle with keeping IT budgets manageable, while wondering whether their plan to get every employee maximizing social media on work time was a good idea after all.

Let's face it: 2009 was a year of tough choices, hard work and frequent uncertainty. Based on customer feedback and experiences, our best insight into technology to watch in 2010 is not the flashiest new experimental toys, but rather the best new optimization of technology that has proven valuable over time. Each idea promises strong ROI, long-term efficiencies, and will still keep your business a step ahead of the competition.

## **Proactive Care: Remote Computer/ Network Management**

Imagine a world where your computer network and all your workstations are monitored 24/7 for hardware problems and vulnerabilities,

receive the latest updates and software patches automatically, are shielded from viruses, and have nightly (or even more often) automated, off-site backup of all data. In the event of a failure, you'll have the ability to restore data in a matter of minutes—not hours or days. You'll know about potential problems long before they bring down your system and reduce service calls while improving your overall network-computing stability.

## **Better Servers, Better Service**

Server virtualization may be the best idea you haven't heard of yet. The latest generation of computer servers allows you to host multiple operating systems — for your mail server, applications or documents — on a single box. The benefits include dramatically lower operating and cooling requirements meaning less energy consumption, better utilization of server resources, and the redeployment of older servers for backup and testing environments.

## **Host with the Most**

When you need employees or contractors to share data and collaborate seamlessly, consider hosted applications



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or cloud computing environments. Among the best applications are Customer Relationship Management (CRM) software applications. Microsoft's new CRM, Microsoft Dynamics, or Salesforce.com can breathe new life into old ACT! and Microsoft Access databases. Also check out Microsoft Office Live; a free solution to share documents and manage projects.

For simplified email marketing, hosted sites such as *mailchimp.com* and *iContact.com* offer easy to use interfaces, free trials, and low-cost subscriptions.

### **Old Phone, New Tricks**

In spite of its humble reputation in a high tech world, your telephone

system may offer one of the best ways to leverage technology. If you are using an older business phone system, unified communications offers cost-effective ways to move far beyond call forwarding and voicemail. Businesses can now affordably integrate voice and data systems for long-term savings on overall telephone and Internet access. Features include automated attendants, call distribution capabilities, and the power to manage call activity and tracking.

A CRM from Microsoft or *salesforce.com* paired with a unified phone system from Cisco, among others, integrates with software to allow easy sales tracking as well as appointment reminders and follow up calls.

No matter how quickly technology changes, all businesses will face the same challenges in the future: Ensuring robust computing systems for administration, improving communications with employees, customers and prospects, deploying easy-to-use systems, and keeping capital expenses in line with future revenue.

The best solution may not be the latest, but you can expect it to be the greatest. — **SBAM**

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### **Business Bytes . . . . .**

#### **H1N1 May Lead to Back Door Approach to Mandatory Paid Sick Leave**

Bills have been introduced in Congress that would mandate that businesses provide seven days of paid sick leave for their employees. To date those bills have not been given serious consideration, as Congress has dealt with more pressing issues. However, the outbreak of the H1N1 flu has provided proponents of mandatory paid sick leave an opportunity to pursue the legislation in a different manner.

**Proposals in both the House and Senate are surfacing that would require employers to provide paid sick leave to employees that contract the H1N1 flu.**

The House bill would provide up to five days of leave and would only apply if the employer told them to stay away from work. The Senate bill would provide up to seven days and the need for sick leave would be at the employee's discretion. **Both bills would exempt businesses with under 15 employees.**

SBAM and our national affiliate, the National Small Business Association, oppose any efforts to require businesses to provide paid sick leave.

### **Business Bytes . . . . .**

#### **SBAM Leader Testifies Before House Banking Committee in Lansing**

Former SBAM Board Chair Jeff Van Winkle recently testified before the House Banking and Financial Services Committee.

**The subject of the hearing was the difficulties that small businesses in Michigan are facing in getting credit from the state's traditional lending sources.**

Van Winkle is an attorney with the Clark Hill law firm in Grand Rapids. Among his specialties is working with clients to obtain financing.

Van Winkle testified that the relationship between banks and their business customers has changed significantly in the last year. Generally, it has been difficult to obtain a commitment for financing on terms that have been satisfactory to the borrowers.

He outlined three specific challenges that borrowers face when seeking new loans or extending existing loans:

1. Substantial devaluation of the value of collateral offered to secure the loan.
2. Exceptionally restrictive covenants regarding continued operation of the business. These include limitations on capital expenditures, debt to equity ratios, and similar restrictions.
3. A requirement of improved debt to equity ratio, specifically requiring cash equity to be injected into the business.

The committee also heard testimony from small business representatives, bankers and credit union officials explaining how new regulations from federal regulators are making it difficult to make loans that would have been given 18 months ago. This is especially the case in Michigan and for manufacturers. The committee will continue to look at the issue to determine if there can be a state solution to this problem.