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We've been arguing recently that voice actually isn't a commodity, though that is the popular impression. So look at the way Natural Convergence segments what otherwise might be considered "just another" hosted VoIP service aimed at small businesses. First of all, the company didn't go looking to be a voice provider. Back in 2001, it really thought small businesses wanted customer relationship management, human resources or other sorts of applications.

As it turns out, "they all said they needed voice services and were willing to pay for it," says Natural Convergence CEO David Cork. So an early task was to segment the market.

"We found that if there was an IT resource on staff or under contract, and the business could host their own services, then it made more sense to sell them an IP PBX," says Cork. "They can handle it."

"Conversely, if there was no IT staff, then the simplest model is to outsource everything," says Cork. So here's the trick. Lots of experienced telecom types say that small business owners and manager won't outsource their phone services. "They will," says Cork.

Cork says his firm doesn't focus where others do. "Broadsoft came out of Centrex space. Others such as Vonage are in consumer space." An analogy might be to what Cbeyond does so well in the "T1 access, phone plus broadband access" space, but with more emphasis on integration of wireless.

"Mobile twinning is popular," says Cork. And what's wanted is more than simple simultaneous ringing of a desk and a mobile phone. "If you take on the cell phone, all the normal features work, you can hold the call and then transfer back to desk phone," says Cork. "Lots of small business owners answer the cell phone first."

"You have to help with the cell phone bill," says Cork. So is customer self service. "Let the user select and configure services the way they want, without paying a service technician."

But it has to be simple. "If you have 400 features, somebody will enable something and break something," says Cork. In addition to requiring no capital upfront, the offering must provide tools so users can manage themselves.

So far, Natural Convergence has found the most powerful combination is a hosted service provider married to the data VAR channel. Next best is a service provider with agents. But, in some cases cell resellers also can play, says Cork.

"Small business understands the "longer contract, free or cheap CPE" model," says Cork.