

# The Best of the Small Business Technology Summit

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*Predicting small business trends -- especially small business computing trends -- is a tricky proposition at best. It helps to get a dose of reality from people who use technology to run their business every day. Never one to work in a vacuum, **Laurie McCabe**, a principal at the **SMB Group**, spent the day with more than 500 small business owners at the 2010 Small Business Technology Summit. Here's her take on the experience.*

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Back in the beautiful Live Free or Die state after attending the **2010 Small Business Summit** earlier this week. This is a fantastic event coordinated by **Ramon Ray** and **Marian Banker**, and held at the Digital Sandbox in the financial district in New York. Whether due to Ramon and team's hard work and great marketing, or a glimmer of hope for an economic recovery, attendance was up over last year. More than 500 attendees turned out and as usual, Ramon energized the crowd and a great networking experience was had by all.

As I'd done in 2009, I wanted to compare our **Top 10 SMB Technology Market Predictions** with what I was hearing at this event as a reality check on our musings. But as a duo, Sanjeev and I had 13 predictions for 2010—as compared to the measly five I'd put together on my own in 2009. So I've selected the 2010 predictions that we made that I saw most in evidence at the event.

This was our number one 2010 prediction. Small business owners and employees at the Summit were most jazzed up about solutions with clearly demonstrable bottom and/or top line business benefits. In the words of one customer, "We have to spend money wisely to do more for our clients and make more money." A few of the solutions that won the Hottest Technology awards that really seemed to hit the mark:

- **EzTexting**, a solution that lets you easily send SMS text messages to customers to help capture their attention at the right place, and right time.
- **SugarSync**, which helps you manage multiple devices, locations, versions, authors, editors, etc. by synching up everything on all your devices automatically.
- **Broadlook Technologies**, Inc.'s Profiler, which helps you quickly find key contact details -- names, titles, email addresses, phone numbers, bios, media mentions and more -- for companies and imports it into your CRM solution or sales database.

More vendors are also stepping up to the plate to make a long term commitment to tune in to true small business requirements and provide a more accessible, personal and positive lifecycle experience to win small business hearts and minds. For instance, the Dell panel, hosted by **Dell Small Business** VP Mel Parker, featured three small business customers (**Vitals.com**, **TecAccess** and **Rightsleeve**) to underscore Dell's focus on two-way conversations and belief that the best way for it to shine is in the reflected glow of customers that are using Dell solutions to help grow their businesses.

### **SMBs Accelerate Their Shift to Digital Marketing Media**

This was our number two prediction for 2010. At last year's event, attendees were asking about how to Tweet or blog. This year, most are now highly engaged in many social media venues. Summit attendees are a Web savvy crowd -- a show of hands indicated that most have a Web site ( more than 40 percent of small businesses in the U.S. don't have a Web site). But even this Web-savvy group is struggling to figure out how to get the biggest bang for their social media buck. For many, the speed of innovation and the universe of social media solutions and options is overwhelming.

During the panel on "Strategies for Success," moderated by Angus Thomson, leader of **Intuit's** Grow Your Business Division, many of the questions that attendees asked centered on how they can more efficiently identify and use tools to help drive traffic to their Web sites. Attendees also had plenty of questions for Melanie Attia of **Campagner** about how to boost results from their email marketing campaigns.

On top of that, they're grappling with how to leverage social media into the digital marketing mix so that they can better integrate customer interactions across the seemingly endless expanse of digital venues. **InfusionSoft** had a steady stream of traffic from people interested in its email marketing plus social media integration story. In a nutshell, there's a lot of confusion about how to best leverage all of these -- and a big opportunity for vendors that can help small businesses sort this out.

### **The New Face of Small Business**

In our number four 2010 prediction, we'd posited that vendors need to look at the small business market through a new segmentation lens. No doubt about it -- the recession, generational changes, globalization, and the frenzied pace of technology innovation are the equivalent of an extreme makeover on the face of small business. Baby boomers aren't retiring, they're starting new businesses, and were well-represented at this event along with Gen X, Gen Y and Millennial entrepreneurs.

But they are coming from different places in their experience and perceptions in areas such as digital marketing and social networking--and technology in general. They all want to figure out how to reach the same destination -- business success --but are likely to take different paths in how they discover, evaluate, purchase and implement solutions. Vendors will need to tune marketing, training and services to meet these different requirements.

### **SMBs' Appetite for Managed Services Grows**

Jumping down to number eight on our 2010 list -- we should have moved this one higher up! Many of the small business owners and IT people I spoke to at the event realize that they need technology to support their business goals, but have reached a point where they don't have the time, expertise or resources to do it right on their own. As one business owner told me, "My business is only as strong as the IT foundation it sits on. We can't afford for our systems to go down."

Dell's booth did a brisk traffic with its **Dell Managed Services** offerings, as did **CMIT Solutions**, which also provides managed services. Small businesses are realizing they can't do it all, and are looking for cost-effective, round the clock remote management services with onsite support. Vendors that can deliver affordable, put proactive, responsive and comprehensive services -- and do it scalably and profitably -- will be in demand.

And what about the rest of our predictions? While I did see and hear evidence for most of them, some, such as "Virtualization Boosts Cloud Computing" are probably more in tune with mid-market requirements than those of small businesses. Others, such as "2009 Acquisitions Drive New Value for SMB customers in 2010" and "Vendors Scramble for SMB Developer Loyalty -- and New Integration Needs Arise" deal more with vendor trends, and rightfully were in background, rather than foreground at this very customer focused event.

At the big picture level, above and beyond individual predictions, what struck me most were that the two themes that really seemed to resonate with the audience were pragmatism and inspiration. Attendees ate up down to earth tips from Shashi Belamkonda of **Network Solutions**, who offered a rapid fire list of ways to immediately boost return on your social media participation, and from Ellen DePasquale, aka the

**Software Revitalist**, who provided practical information to help small businesses get better results from software solutions. (By the way, here's a link to all the **great pictures Shashi took** at the Summit).

However, attendees were also riveted when **Seth Godin**, bestselling author and entrepreneur, urged them not to get out of the commodity business and trying to “fit in”—or price alone will dictate whether you are in or out. Seth's call was to be an artist in business, aiming to change the status quo in your category, instead of following the conventional wisdom to do the same thing as the cheaper and better.

Of course, there were many other interesting discussions, people and solutions at the Summit, but I'm out of time. Check the tweet stream #smallbizsummit for lots of good info and insights from the many Tweeters at the event. I'm looking forward to the 2011 Summit already!

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