

by Aphrodite Knoop

Life Support Needed for Healthcare Technology Customer Service

Today's healthcare providers face a challenging operational environment. Their services are increasingly technologically dependent, and consequently need a strong technology foundation and business continuity practices to manage operations effectively and deliver safe, first-rate patient care. On the other hand, medical equipment companies are seeking strategic opportunities to leverage their investment in product development to increase client satisfaction and achieve a better return on investment.

"The goal is to reach a point where there is a better ROI for both sides," said Yadin B. David, PhD, Biomedical Engineering Department, Texas Children's Hospital. "You need the proper environment and understanding between the vendor and user. Now there is a gap between the two in terms of users' needs and expectations, support and service."

Hospitals are complex entities encompassing biomedical, pharmacological, information technology and many other types of departments and services, all integrated in delivering care. These groups must be able to work collectively. Typically, the biomedical and IT departments are the front line in implementation of any new products.

Client/Vendor Expectations

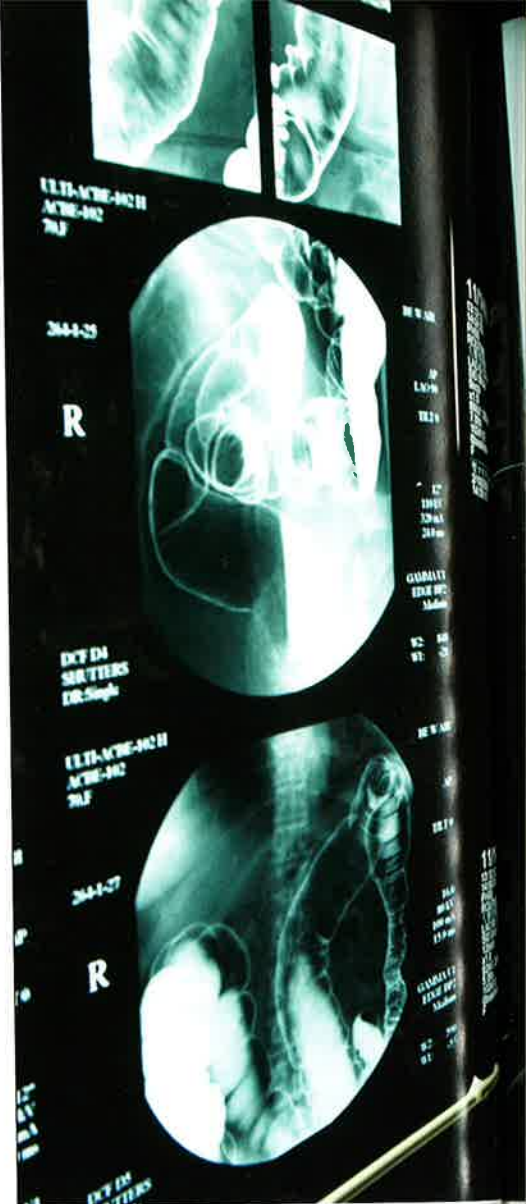
The complex healthcare landscape demands that vendors understand not only the departments they serve, but also how the various groups interrelate. Vendors must help these departments become more technologically competent and support products with adequate staff training, remote trouble shooting, on-site equipment consignment and servicing, and so forth. They must also understand how hospitals identify and select products, and how they integrate these products into practice. Typical considerations include user interface, safety, space and utility require-

ments, ease of use, integration with existing technology and product support.

Challenges in Implementing Technology

Healthcare providers must also think about how they integrate all new technology to address intra-hospital working relationships; how failure of mission critical systems could trigger a crisis response; and the implications of changing competency requirements, user training and disaster preparedness for the biomedical community.

They face process challenges under circumstances in which there is no room for error. Caregivers struggle to do more with less. In addition, the management of higher-acuity patients is based on a larger volume of real-time information, so hospital workers





THOUGHT LEADERSHIP SUMMIT Medical Products Customer Strategy Summit 2006

Thought Leadership Summit's Medical Products Customer Strategy Summit 2006 was designed for attendees from medical device, medical supply and medical equipment companies in North America to come together, exchange ideas and share best practices.

The summit featured real-world case studies and interactive panel discussions about how improved sales, service, marketing and distributor interactions are helping the best run medical products companies differentiate themselves and create a competitive advantage. Among the presenters were industry experts and hospital representatives, including Yadin B. David, PhD, Biomedical Engineering Department, Texas Children's Hospital; John Zimmer, vice president of marketing, Toshiba America Medical Systems; and Bill Sahota, manager, CRM, St. Jude Medical, U.S. division.

Attendees and speakers included executives focused on sales, service, marketing, partner relationship management, customer relationship management and information technology. In addition, thought leaders from key analyst companies, industry institutions and academia shared their perspectives.

"There were many key players and hospital representatives," Sahota said. "We gained insights into customer activities, software, sales and implementation."

The 2007 summit promises to be as informative and engaging. For more information about the 2006 and future summits, visit www.tlsummits.com/medical.

are pressed to constantly gather, synthesize and integrate life-critical information accurately and efficiently.

Improved Customer Service and Technology Integration

Some forward-thinking equipment vendors have taken note of client needs and have begun implementing measures to help hospitals better integrate and maintain technologies, improving their customer relationship management (CRM) strategies in the process.

Bill Sahota, manager of CRM at St. Jude Medical, U.S. division, is a proponent of sales force automation and of using automation strategies to balance sales representative and customer support. St. Jude Medical, a cardiac and neuromodulation device maker, has created an automation system that allows for integrated

views of customers and the processes surrounding customer activity for its U.S. division, the sales arm, and the CRMD product division.

"With sales force automation systems, we want to balance making it easy with getting it right," Sahota said. He explained that the biggest issue is not automation; it is process ownership. Who is responsible for order processing or error management? Is it always the sales force or customer support? In fact, the answer can vary and systems should accommodate flexible processes to adapt to changing situations.

"We want to create process consistency and provide value to hospitals and physicians as well as sales reps. We accomplish this by providing our sales force with process automation built into portable devices such as PDAs and laptops.

Armed with these solutions they can enter information at the hospital such as products used, pricing and other implant-related data. At the time of implant, we can then print out a pro forma sales order, doctor dictation, temporary patient ID cards and more. That's value added for the physician. It is accurate, well formatted and immediate," Sahota said.

Sahota described the field-generated printouts as only the starting point. A pro forma sales order goes to an enterprise resource planning system for invoicing, which speeds the process by bypassing manual customer-service data entry. This also reduces errors by eliminating multiple hand-order entries and enabling a single point of data entry in the operating room.

St. Jude Medical's example of sales force automation addresses some of the mixed needs of sales representatives and customer support staff who service healthcare clients. It reduces pricing errors, provides a better audit trail, enables improved visibility to sales order data, and provides an IT foundation to support Sarbanes-Oxley compliance.

Many healthcare providers continue to enter patient records manually. Other barriers also hinder progress, including HIPAA and Sarbanes-Oxley regulations. Further, it is not as easy for hospitals to justify IT infrastructure versus buying new medical equipment because the high costs are a major deterrent.

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Sahota noted that CRM processes across the industry can be improved by bringing together the needs of diverse business groups and leveraging information and functions for all customer groups (patients, hospitals, physicians, field representatives, etc.).

While some vendors seek to improve CRM through technology, others pursue changes in operational and customer service processes. Toshiba America Medical Systems, which manufactures and distributes imaging technologies, sought to improve client service and relationships by soliciting client feedback and acting on the resulting recommendations.

"We believe that CRM is about managing the relationship with the customer. We look at how to manage the relationship and the experiences the customer has consistently through the life cycle of a product," said John Zimmer, vice president of marketing for Toshiba America Medical Systems.

Typically, CRM is complicated because a sales person will visit a hospital and set up a deal. After that, several different people will perform installation, training and servicing of equipment. "During the 1990s, we discovered that if even one of those 'touches' was not positive, we lost the customer," Zimmer said.

As a result, the company built a system to identify customer needs and align those needs with Toshiba's mission. Rather than relying on subjective internal studies, the company turned to third-party evaluators to learn how its business practices affected customers.

"We found that the truth is always worse than we expected—and there is no easy solution. The good news

is that customers who give their honest feedback are trying to help you," Zimmer said. "Customers expect a return on their investment—that being your product."

Toshiba discovered that there are numerous unexpected benefits of feedback and improvement implementation. Among these are elevated product and company reputation, positive exposure in publications, dramatically improved customer quality, and increased pride and satisfaction among staff members who know they have made a difference and satisfied clients.

"Our success is rooted in our clients' success. If we can contribute to their success, then we all win," Zimmer said.

Collaboration for Success

David said, "Partnering can help bridge the gap between reactive and proactive processes. We need to collaborate with peers, regulatory bodies and OEMS/Industry. We need to work with vendors to improve support in the new environment of integration. To achieve that, we must move from antagonistic to collaborative agreements with suppliers.

"I feel so passionate about this mission that I founded the not-for-profit Healthcare Technology Foundation. Here industry vendors and user hospitals can come together and investigate how to make technology safer and more supportable."

Ultimately, success depends on the effective intersection of people, technology and processes all working seamlessly to bring about improved quality, safety, performance and cost control.