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Riding the Wave: The Ups & Downs of Selling In the SMB Market

By T.C. Doyle and Rich Cirillo, VARBusiness

Mon. Aug. 13, 2001

Though more small businesses use its products than virtually any other company on the planet, even Microsoft, the world's largest software maker, has trouble with a seemingly simple challenge that confounds so many. That, of course, is understanding the small- and midsize business market.

For example, although Microsoft sunk millions of dollars into an innovative portal called bCentral where small-business customers build and manage Web presences, market their businesses online and manage relationships with customers, only a quarter of the customers that were expected to sign up actually did. If that isn't bad enough, Microsoft has lost 10 to 15 percent of its small-business partners in each of the last three years. Despite providing a boatload of help to them, those partners chose to leave the Microsoft fold of their own volition.

Confounded, Bob Clough, Microsoft's vice president of small business, has vowed to better understand a market segment that so many are now targeting. After a year on the job, Clough says, "We have learned what we don't know in the last year."

Others could only be so lucky. "As you know, in small-business sales and marketing, there are no silver bullets in channel marketing," sums Clough, who adds that Microsoft will try everything from events, seminars, telesales and targeted campaigns in fiscal 2002 to attract the elusive small-business customer, and the partner that caters to it.

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