

Features, Advantages, and Benefits of Unified Communications

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Both vendors selling systems and enterprise staff seeking project funding need to be able to clearly distinguish between the features, the advantages, and the benefits of unified communications solutions. In many presentations and discussions I've seen, these distinctions are frequently blurred. The result is that the potential impact of UC is misunderstood and often undervalued.

Features *describe* and are often listed on the product data sheet. "This car model has 4-wheel drive." Advantages *differentiate*; they point out how this product is better than an alternative model or brand. "4-wheel drive means I can always get where I am going, even in deep snow." Benefits are about *impact*; they translate the features and the advantages into tangible (and measurable) improved or optimized results. "By showing up for work, even when it's snowing hard, I can earn \$350 and get all the new leads that day."

Seems simple. But features, advantages, and benefits are mixed up all the time. Figuring out the benefits is especially tricky. For one thing, benefits tend to be specific to the prospective buyer. I get no "snow-day" benefit from 4-wheel drive if I just use the car in southern California, or if I don't need my car to get to work. More importantly, *advantages* are frequently mistaken for *benefits*. "Always getting where I want to go" sounds like a benefit, doesn't it? But it's an advantage. To become a benefit, we have to link it to a result that meet a goal or objective – earning income or the value of more leads.

Is this just semantics? Not at all. Telecom history is littered with products that never really got off the ground. They had features and even advantages, but the customers weren't shown identifiable and measurable benefits. Unified messaging (UM) is a good example. Too often salesmen tried to sell these systems by touting that each user will save 17 minutes a day. That's an advantage, not a benefit. What was missing was a believable story about how to aggregate those 17 minutes times 300 people into helping attain some corporate goal. But where UM's advantages could be turned into a tangible benefit, adoption rapidly followed. Many law firms are UM success stories, and not because the attorneys saved 17 minutes per day. The benefit was that UM solved a business problem – contact and document management – by consolidating relevant information into a single desktop and mobile user interface (e.g., a BlackBerry) and into a single trackable document location with automatic archiving and easy foldering by matter or case.

UC faces similar challenges and similar opportunities. When suppliers talk about UC enabling reaching the right person any time, any where, I'm not hearing how those *advantages* translate into a tangible *benefit*. And until that translation is clearly articulated, UC will face hurdles from

the green eyeshade guys. One pathway to success has two additional steps. First, show how reaching the person quickly cuts cycle time, or gets answers to customers faster. Second, translate those time savings into fewer people needed or to the bottom line value of speeding up the process.

As UC concepts become more widespread, we will see applications develop in many areas within companies. There will be advantages and benefits to individuals, to workgroups and departments, to the entire enterprise, and even to collections of companies within a supply chain. The most easily found UC *advantages* are often for individuals. But the most easily identified and most important *benefits* are usually from business process improvements within workgroups or departments.

My advice? Watch the subtleties of distinctions between features, advantages, and benefits. While “saving 17 minutes a day” or “driving through the snow” or “right-clicking on the sender’s name to call them” all sound like benefits, they are really advantages. And advantages do not directly translate into cost savings or revenue gains. What’s needed is to show and measure how UC concepts, when built into business processes, cut costs, reduce cycle time, cut human latency, or improve the customer experience and revenues.

If you’re a vendor, make sure your sales channels really understand these distinctions, and learn how to identify the quantifiable benefits in your prospects’ operations. If you’re on an enterprise team that is proposing a UC project to the Finance Committee, think hard about how you translate the product features and advantages into real benefits that can demonstrably impact your company’s bottom line. Good luck.

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