

University of Cincinnati: Taking cellular communication to the next level

Overview

■ **Business Challenge**

The University of Cincinnati (UC) wanted to empower all of its students with enhanced cellular communications and first-of-their-kind wireless services, but to do so it had to compete effectively against commercial cellular carriers.

■ **Solution**

Working with a local cellular service provider under an IBM-developed collaborative business model, the university created a compelling cellular offering for students and faculty that offers superior coverage and unique, university-specific functionality.

■ **Key Benefits**

- *Minimizes risk and cost by outsourcing day-to-day operations*
- *Guarantees that all students can be reached easily because of campus-wide coverage and universal adoption*
- *Creates an innovation “laboratory” to encourage the development of new services, including academic tools, lifestyle services and security offerings*



Connecting to the student body

Today, it's a safe bet that every young person entering a university has a cell phone when they arrive on campus. For universities, this presents a great opportunity to reach out and connect to students in a new way. For example, what if a professor could contact all of his or her students with an important course announcement, simply by sending a text message? Or, what if the university could send out a safety alert in a time of emergency?

The pervasiveness of cell phones makes communicating in this way a real possibility. But with thousands of community members carrying myriad devices connected to different cellular carriers, it's impractical.

“It positions UC as an innovation incubator, which fits into our mission as a research university.”

– Fred Siff, professor, vice-president and CIO, University of Cincinnati

Giving students unique communication capabilities

Business Benefits

- Enables UC to become a “virtual” cellular provider, reaping rewards while minimizing risk and cost, by outsourcing day-to-day operations
- Guarantees that all students can be reached easily because of campus-wide coverage (even in buildings and underground) and universal adoption
- Attracts users by competing effectively against commercial carriers on price, while providing better functionality and coverage
- Creates an innovation “laboratory” to encourage the development of new value-added services, including academic tools, lifestyle services and security offerings
- Helps UC further its goal of enriching the college experience by becoming a relevant part of students’ lives

“What we want to do is create and sell what makes UC Mobile unique, and that’s value-added services.”

– Fred Siff

An obvious answer is for the university itself to provide cellular service and get everyone on the same system. This raises business-related issues. First and foremost, universities are not in the business of being cellular carriers, with their own networks, nor should they be. Beyond this, there are competitive concerns. For the true potential of universal student connectivity to be realized, the university needs to lure students away from their existing carriers.

University of Cincinnati professor, vice-president and CIO Fred Siff expresses the case eloquently. “We’ve got 35,000 students. Every one has a cell phone, and none of them are ours. That’s a bad business model. It’s a bad connectivity model. At the same time, we’re providing land lines in dormitories that none of our students want or need. So it only makes sense for us to offer the students cell phone service in some way.”

The University of Cincinnati, moving ahead of the curve

The University of Cincinnati recognized early on the potential of wireless communications, and set out to find a way to make university-provided cellular service a practical reality. Working with IBM Global Business Services, UC developed a sustainable business model that would position it as a “virtual” cellular provider: By leveraging a relationship with a local cellular service provider, the university would be able to offer students UC-branded cell phone service without having to get into the business of network operations. To clearly link the offering to UC and distinguish it from commercial offerings, it would be called “Bearcat” after the university’s mascot. Further differentiation comes from UC-specific features, such as the ability for graduating seniors to keep their number and voice mail after they leave, to maintain their link to the university.

To formulate the model, IBM applied best practice methodologies to examine the relative advantages of adaptive, transformational and breakthrough technologies and the business models that support them. The model chosen was adaptive, meaning that it offered tangible business value without being disruptive to the university’s operations or requiring UC to actually start up an entirely new business unit.

Once the business model had been finalized, the university took advantage of IBM’s telecommunications expertise to make it a reality. IBM helped the university define the solution architecture and craft an RFP to attract a cellular operator. IBM also helped to design and deploy the on-campus infrastructure, acting as consultant, integrator and project manager.

A clear understanding of needs...and wants

"You can't look at this kind of service in isolation," says Siff. "We can make our cell phone offering mandatory, but that's missing the point. Not only do all the students already have cell phones when they arrive, they're probably locked into a contract. Chances are good that they're on their parents' plan and have features that they already like. So even though we want all our students to have a UC Mobile Bearcat phone, we should not force them to adopt it."

Siff clearly understands what it takes to make the university's student communications initiative work. The key, he says, is to compete directly with commercial carriers. "If we can't offer a financial advantage, we should not be in the business. We have to do better than the market by offering both better price and better capability."

First-of-their-kind, value-added services and superior quality are a central part of the UC Mobile package. With its own on-campus infrastructure, the university has been able to provide coverage throughout the campus, even underground and within structures. No commercial carrier can match that capability.

UC Mobile's enhanced service offerings are truly compelling. Security is an essential core service: Every Bearcat phone can call campus police directly at the press of a button. Combined with universal coverage on campus, this makes the Bearcat phone the only option for students who need help anytime, anywhere. The Bearcat phone is also a powerful academic tool. By linking the phones directly to the university's Blackboard academic application suite, faculty can provide students with important course updates via text message.

Convenience and lifestyle-related services are also very popular. One allows students to see the estimated time of arrival for campus shuttles, based not on pre-published schedules but the actual location of the GPS-equipped shuttle buses. Other services even involve the surrounding community—the most recent value-added offering is the use of the Bearcat phone as a way to pay for goods. Money is deposited into an account that the phone can access, and it's used in much the same way as a debit card. The first partner in this program is the Kroger supermarket chain (headquartered in Cincinnati), and scores of other local merchants have signed up as well.

Key Components

Services

IBM Global Business Services

Why it matters

The University of Cincinnati wanted to take advantage of the popularity of cell phones to give its students and faculty a new level of enhanced wireless connectivity and utility. Using a new, collaborative business model that minimizes risk and generates new revenue, UC worked with a local cellular carrier to create a first-of-its-kind, highly competitive cellular offering package with compelling features. With all students and faculty using the UC Mobile service, the university can provide unique, highly relevant services including enhanced security and academic tools.

Building a business case

Siff knew that a winning marketplace offering was only part of the equation. "A lot of universities lost their collective shirts on long distance," he says. "We did not want to get into the phone business per se. A sound business plan was vital to getting the UC administration to support the plan, and IBM helped us put together a business model that puts the day-to-day operational burden on our cellular partner and allows us to focus efforts elsewhere."

The development of enhanced offerings, however, is kept in-house. "What we want to do is create and sell what makes UC Mobile unique, and that's value-added services," Siff says. "It also positions UC as an innovation incubator, which fits into our mission as a research university."

The initial rollout of the plan, to an incoming freshman class, was highly successful. UC has expanded the service, providing all residential students with a Bearcat phone and incorporating basic UC Mobile service fees into its housing costs. Just as with commercial carriers, students have the ability to upgrade their service level and phone for an additional fee.

The business model that UC came up with is a win-win-win for all concerned. Students get competitive rates and unique services, the local cellular partner gets a guaranteed subscriber base in exchange for favorable rates, and UC gets reduced risk, a new revenue stream and a way to better serve the university community.

For more information

To learn more about how IBM can help transform your business and help you innovate, please contact your IBM representative or IBM Business Partner.

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