



Stellar Performance

Comms Business Magazine talks to Solar Communications Chief Executive Mark Colquhoun about his firm's move into the mid market and how, by working with ShoreTel distributor ScanSource Communications Europe, his business has flourished.

Formed in 1988, Chippenham based Solar Communications was acquired by Mark Colquhoun in 2007 at which point he began putting his own mark on the company and transitioning its activities from a small SME reseller in to the £10m plus mid-market supplier that it is today.

"Solar Communications had been a successful reseller of PBX systems and lines and & calls to the smaller SME user for many years. A typical customer order at the time I took over the business was for a 30-extension phone system plus some minutes business. An order for a 100-user system, although not unheard of, was a rare event!

Today a typical customer communications system order is likely to comprise a 150 to 400 user PBX together with a LAN and WAN infrastructure deal, an MPLS network and all the associated IP connectivity.

Many of our clients are now multi-site larger organisations, where it makes perfect sense and forms a very reasonable proposition for us to sell a more complete and integrated solution that includes the communications platform and all the associated networks needed for voice and data communications throughout their entire estate.

Increasingly, as technologies develop and converge, we are also looking to provide mobile device integration for cellular phones and tablets as well.

Our customer propositions are all based around the ShoreTel platform which we source from their distributor, ScanSource Communications Europe. Throughout our transformation from an SME to a mid-market reseller ScanSource has stood shoulder to shoulder with us at every step to assist us in realising our ambitions.

Today Solar Communications is of course able to stand on our own two feet and is fully self-sufficient with the ShoreTel product however our ScanSource account manager is always available to help us go the extra miles in securing new business deals.

As far as logistics are concerned I have to say they are great - nothing has ever gone missing and they pull out all the stops when we need something special. However, it is the finance areas where ScanSource has proved to be such a great partner. Moving from smaller SME deals to 400 user plus solutions inevitably means a far higher ticket price on our client proposals. Here ScanSource has come in to its own with a unique and refreshing approach that entails us working very closely together with credit terms and arrangements that fit our new business model perfectly.

Likewise, when it comes to technical support ScanSource has all the resources in place to make sure we get the right results for our clients.

Like many resellers in the UK today our sales teams know few boundaries so we were delighted to hear that in ShoreTel's reorganisation of their EMEA distribution strategy, ScanSource would now be active in additional territories - The German speaking DACH region of Germany, Austria and Switzerland plus Belgium and the Netherlands. This means we have access to partners for sales of systems into these countries; e.g. where a UK client has branch offices etc.... It's yet another 'tick in the box' which

both ScanSource and Solar can provide to users."

Looking at the market overall Colquhoun finds some elements perplexing.

"A lot of what I read in the press suggests that the market is very difficult. Solar is not seeing that nor are deals disappearing through the dreaded 'decision deferred' conversations that many are experiencing. What we are witnessing is that even though financial directors have agreed and allocated budgets to new communications solutions for their organisation, they are remaining very close and party to the whole decision making process from start to finish.

In days gone by the market would benefit from the adds, moves and changes much more than today, as well as clients expanding in to new business premises."

Apart from seeing resellers becoming very aggressive in pricing proposals to win deals Colquhoun says it's very much 'business as usual'.

Colquhoun concludes, "Our relationship with ScanSource and our confidence in the ShoreTel platform is at a high and our joint track record of working together speaks for itself.

Solar Communications has won the ShoreTel European Partner of the Year in 2008, 2009, 2010, and 2011, the ShoreTel Outstanding Customer Service Award in 2009, 2010 and 2011 as well as the ShoreTel Circle of Excellence 2010 and 2011. The latter being the highest recognition that a partner can receive. It is awarded to the top 10 partners globally in recognition of outstanding customer service, product knowledge and sales capability. Solar Communications is proud to be the first and only European recipient of this award.

In addition to this Growth, Business Awards recognised Solar Communications as one of its top 50 Rising Stars of 2011. Seeking to identify the 50 fastest-growing companies in the UK, the annual Rising Stars ranking is the only such research to consider both profit and turnover growth in its assessment."

Vendor Comment

"At ShoreTel we put great emphasis on our resellers as they are essential for our success. Around the world, customers rely on their expertise to deliver solutions which can unleash the full potential of their workforce. A key ShoreTel reseller, Solar has been recognised in a number of our partner award schemes for its excellent work with customers, helping them deliver innovative and reliable enterprise communication solutions.

The successful collaboration between Solar and its channel partner, ScanSource, has resulted in Solar transforming from a small SME reseller into a mid-market supplier using the ShoreTel communication platform. We're pleased to see both organisations working closely and delivering outstanding service to end customers," said Andrew Gray, EMEA Marketing Director, ShoreTel.



Mark Colquhoun, Managing Director, Solar Communications