

Be Prepared

Top 10 Questions Your Prospects May Ask You



At a Glance

Compared to a lot of businesses, CA Technologies is in a unique position in that we sell to two core markets, with hundreds of enterprise customers and hundreds of MSP customers. Over the course of several years, we've worked quite a bit with executives in both markets, and that vantage point has helped us gain some insights into what makes a successful MSP/client relationship.

Over the years, we've been asked to provide some input into what organizations should look for when selecting an MSP. We've included our top 10 questions below—and what we see as the key takeaway for the MSP. These topics may be good to keep in mind as you position your business with prospects during your next sales engagement.

1. Do you have proven experience?

The last thing an enterprise account needs is to have a service provider that's learning on the fly. They need an MSP that has direct, long-standing experience in the services they've decided to outsource. That's why it's no surprise that in a recent survey (see note below), Enterprise Management Associates found "proven experience/depth of expertise" as the top factor enterprises use to evaluate MSPs.

We encourage seasoned staff at the prospect organization to ask detailed, targeted questions of their MSP representatives, and ensure the answers they're given speak to deep technical and operational expertise. Also, we stress that prospects consider whether a service provider can meet longer term needs. We encourage them to look at the emerging requirements, both from a technology and scalability standpoint. While it's most important to find a fit that works

now, the better an MSP can grow and adapt along with the organization's business, the more value the customer will realize from the relationship in the long term.

Your takeaway: In sales situations, sell your experience honestly. Oversell, and you may raise flags for the person sitting across the table.

2. Can I see your service catalog?

The service catalog can say a lot about the MSP, and it's a great first step in assessing whether a vendor's the best match. First, and most obviously, decision makers need to make sure the services outlined map to the IT service they're looking to outsource. Next, the service catalog can provide insights into how formalized an MSP's service offerings are. For example, the catalog should provide clear definitions as to what services and capabilities are provided, and, if different tiers are provided, it should be clear what they get as they move up each tier.

We also advise decision makers to look at the service catalog to spot those service providers that are trying to be all things to all people—adding new capabilities in a reactive fashion to meet near-term sales objectives—rather than being an organization that's been proven to deliver a given service effectively. By presenting a focused service catalog, an

MSP can help convey that they are really equipped to deliver on their commitments.

Your takeaway: Look objectively at your service catalog. What does it say about your business?

3. Who will our day-to-day contacts be?

We've all had this experience: Vendor representatives come in during the sales process and amaze everyone with their savvy and expertise. After the contract's signed, those folks are never seen again, and you're left with junior team members still finding their way. This is particularly devastating in an IT service provider context, where success truly is about the people.

That's why we underscore the importance of having prospects identify and interview the people who'll be their day-to-day contacts for account management and technical support. We encourage them to treat it as a job interview, and get a detailed understanding of their approach to communication, their experience, and their makeup.

Your takeaway: Be ready to have front-line staff participate in prospect discussions, and do what you need to have them sell the business—both upfront and during the course of ongoing interactions.

4. What kinds of migration services are provided?

Depending on the type of service being outsourced, migrating from an internal to externally sourced service can require significant effort. For both the MSP and the business, it's critical to define respective roles and responsibilities. Getting clarity and honesty at this point can be vital in terms of expectation setting, and can provide a lot of insight into the vendor. We encourage decision makers to look for vendors that approach this upfront process as part of building a long term relationship, rather than a one-time transaction.

Your takeaway: Do what you can to help ensure a smooth migration, and treat it as an investment in a long-term relationship.

5. How strong is your business?

The act of researching and migrating to a service provider represents a significant investment, and the beginning of a partnership. Enterprises want this to be a long term relationship so they can enjoy value in the long term. Toward that end, we counsel decision makers to gauge, in as rigorous a way as possible, an MSP's long-term viability. To start, we encourage them to look at the numbers. They should assess profits, operating cash flow, resource utilization, cash flow, and long term debt.

Another key to viability is the track record. While, as any mutual fund prospectus will tell you, "past results are no guarantee of future performance," a long track record is hard to beat. If they have made it through the past five to ten years, the MSP must be doing many things right.

Your takeaway: You can't make this up. Run a sound, efficient operation, and the numbers and validity will follow.

6. What's in your data center?

Depending on the nature of the IT service being outsourced, the issues and concerns to focus on in this area can vary significantly for a given prospect. At a high level, it's important they gauge the MSP's sophistication. For example, if a high degree of performance and scalability is required, does the vendor's infrastructure leverage virtualization to more efficiently handle traffic spikes? If reporting is important, how are reports generated? Manual reports compiled in Excel or automated reports that provide easy customization? Automation, sophistication, and agility are all keys to making service providers good at what they do, and a lot of that stems from the sophistication of the infrastructure they have in place.

Your takeaway: Infrastructure investments and sophistication don't just help operations, but sales as well.

7. Can I tour your facilities?

If the answer to this question is "no", we tell prospects to start looking elsewhere. If an MSP doesn't allow these types of visits, they are raising the possibility that they have something to hide. While a prospect can only tell so much from a tour of an IT service provider's facility, they can get a good reading for the people and the way they've set their infrastructure up. While walking past a server rack won't reveal whether servers are patched correctly, or whether they're running optimally, prospects can see what they're running, whether they're in a good, climate controlled environment, and more. This is a good time to verify security and availability measures as well.

Your takeaway: Here again, your infrastructure and facilities can help sell. Do what it takes to be ready to show them in a positive light.

8. Can I speak with five customer references?

Talking to an MSP's customers is probably the most vital step of all. It's a critical way to verify that the service provider's answers are accurate and forthcoming. Does the customer attest to the MSP's claims of being responsive to inquiries? Does the up time the customer has been seeing jibe with the commitments the vendor is making? Also, prospects should look at the tenure of the customer's engagements. Here again, long track records are great to see.

Your takeaway: No surprises here. Happy customers are key to survival. Happy, referenceable customers are key to growth.

9. Do you outsource any parts of your infrastructure to other IT service providers?

As prevalent as IT outsourcing is today, it can make perfect sense for an MSP to outsource part of their operations to an external provider. However, it is important for a prospect to understand this up front. What they don't want is to encounter an issue and start seeing finger pointing among various IT outsource companies. If a vendor does use external IT service providers, prospects need to make sure they're clear on accountability, escalation processes, and commitments.

Your takeaway: If you outsource, make sure you're clear on these issues, so you can tell a clear story to the prospect.

10. Can I see your contracts and service level agreements?

Early on, we try to get decision makers to assess the agreements they'd be getting into if they move forward with a new MSP. They need to get clarification on what obligations are. If, after a few weeks of signing up with

the service provider, what happens if the client wants to terminate? What are acceptable grounds for termination? Will a refund be provided? Also, we advise decision makers to look at what kind of service level agreements are in place. What kind of commitments does the MSP make, and what happens if service levels are missed? Here, beyond the specifics of the agreements, prospects can also infer a lot in terms of how the service provider stands behind their people and obligations.

Your takeaway: Make sure your agreements are current, and accurately reflect the commitments you deliver on every day.

Conclusion

If you're a seasoned MSP, you know better than anyone the common pitfalls organizations run into when they're looking for vendors, and how they can avoid them. How would you advise end user accounts if you were in our shoes?

About This Document: Developed by the CA Service Provider Center of Excellence

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