

AT&T goes door to door for sales

Companies love to interact with customers online because it's more efficient than providing a live customer representative on the phone, but as telecom competition escalates, the players find they can't always follow the cheapest pathway.

AT&T Inc. this month launched an advertising counteroffensive against cable titan Comcast Corp., which has been stealing its phone customers. It is sending salespeople door to door to drum up business.

"We need to reach out to customers in many different ways," said Steven Mitchell, vice president and general manager for AT&T Illinois. "People are more comfortable talking in their own homes. They will tell you their needs more readily than if you approach them at the mall, where they're busy doing something else. So we're sending our agents to meet them" at home.

As the phone giant loses customers to cable competitors, it has had to adjust its outlook, Mitchell said, but door-to-door marketing isn't easy.

"We start in the afternoon, talking to people who are home and noting where no one's home," Mitchell said. "Then we circle back later to hit the houses after people get home from work."

Some door-to-door activity is winding down as summer ends because AT&T assigned the jobs to college students working as summer interns who are now back on campus, he said. Other agents work for outside vendors hired by AT&T.

Comcast, AT&T's nemesis, has been going door to door to win customers "since day one," said Angelynne Amores, a spokeswoman for the cable operator.

AT&T's wired voice and Internet services are now being marketed in company stores that previously sold only wireless phones under the discontinued Cingular brand. The wired side of the company is becoming more like wireless in its aggressive ad campaigns intended to win customers back from Comcast by emphasizing lower prices.

It's a far cry from a decade ago when Chicago's dominant phone company faced little competition for residential customers and requires a new approach to marketing, said Mitchell.

"My job is to make AT&T Illinois act like a small company," he said. "We have to change to meet the changing market."

COMPUTERS VS. VIRUS: It's rare to hear the words "computer" and "virus" put together in a good way, but IBM Corp. is giving it a try.

IBM is harnessing computers to help researchers look for new ways to fight viruses behind dengue fever, West Nile virus and other infections. The only defense against these diseases that have migrated from the tropics to North America is to avoid bites from mosquitoes, which carry the viruses.

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Scientists at the University of Texas Medical Branch, getting some help from University of Chicago researchers, plan to run computer models looking at how millions of candidate molecules might interfere with the viruses, providing a path to treat or prevent the illnesses.

The drawback is the scientists estimate it will take about 50,000 hours of computer time to run the necessary models. That's where the World Community Grid comes in. Organized by IBM, it consists of people who donate their computers to work on community projects when they aren't surfing the Web or doing other things on their computers.

With all these computers working on problems in their spare time, the grid is ranked among the top five super-computers in the world, and it will be put to work on running models to simulate how molecular foes of the viruses might work.

There are now more than 300,000 people who have connected some 700,000 computers to the grid.

"Anyone with a computer and Internet access can be part of the solution to address this critical health concern," said Stanley Litow, president of the IBM International Foundation. "If 100,000 volunteers sign up within the first week for this project, it could reduce the time required to complete calculations by 50 percent."

People can volunteer their computers by registering on www.worldcommunitygrid.org. They download a small program so that when their computer is idle, it can ask the grid for a problem, do the calculations and send back the results. A screensaver appears while the computer is doing grid work.

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