

A green-tinted background featuring a technical drawing of a mechanical system, possibly a pump or engine component. The drawing includes various pipes, valves, and a large circular component on the left. Handwritten annotations in white are scattered throughout the drawing, including "1 1/4 inch", "ventil", "(2.0)", "1/4 inch", "reg. M", "vent.", "2 inch", "Vand", and "water height: 698".

BIG TRENDS

for small businesses

New technology that means business

Today, if you tell someone you'll be in touch, they may not only ask when but how. Business owners have more communications channels at their disposal than ever before. You can email, IM, tweet, chat or message over Facebook, and collaborate over the Internet on your computer, smartphone or on one of the new tablet computers. When voice communications becomes necessary to further collaborate or resolve a critical or complex business issue, you can call over a desk phone, cell or smartphone. You even can talk over the Internet.

Technology innovations that have dramatically changed the way you communicate have also raised expectations about your availability. With a laptop, Internet connection, Skype and a headset you can conduct business from anywhere and have all the information you need at hand.

Because you can be available anywhere at any time, people expect that you will be. When there's a problem or an emergency, nothing is more comforting to customers than getting in touch with you. Fortunately, you never need to be out of touch since new mobile technology enables you to work wherever your work day takes you.



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Being available and productive whenever and wherever you are is just one of the ways new technology is impacting your business. By staying connected to customers, you better serve their needs. Flexibility also gives you more time to focus on new business efforts and spend more time with suppliers and partners. Your employees benefit too. They can work together wherever they are and have real time access to internal and external information sources even on the go.

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Read on to discover seven trends you can take advantage of now.





TREND ONE:

Your workforce is everywhere.

How many of your employees come into the office every day or any day? The number of 'untethered' employees is growing due to the Internet and new mobile solutions.

Employing workers who telework some or all of the time can benefit your bottom line by lowering real estate costs. It also boosts productivity because it enables your employees to work where they want in the way that works best for the task at hand. When employees need to collaborate, they can engage face-to-face in a small group or large meeting or get on a call. When they need their own space to be creative, innovate or problem solve, they can work at home, within your office or even at a coffee shop. The technology affords your team flexibility yet assures they stay connected to each other and you.



TREND TWO:

Devices can 'talk amongst themselves'.

As noted above, you probably employ a range of communication devices but do they all work together? If you get an instant message or a call does it go to email and vice versa? Think how much more effective your communications would be if all your devices worked together. Fortunately, that now is happening and the technology trend is aptly called Unified Communications (UC). It delivers voice, email, SMS, video conferencing and document sharing into a single interface so that you easily can relay any or all of the data to others. UC has the potential to speed up communications between your customers, suppliers and staff. Some UC solutions combine a PC with a desk phone and the technology is also moving into the smartphone and tablet arenas.

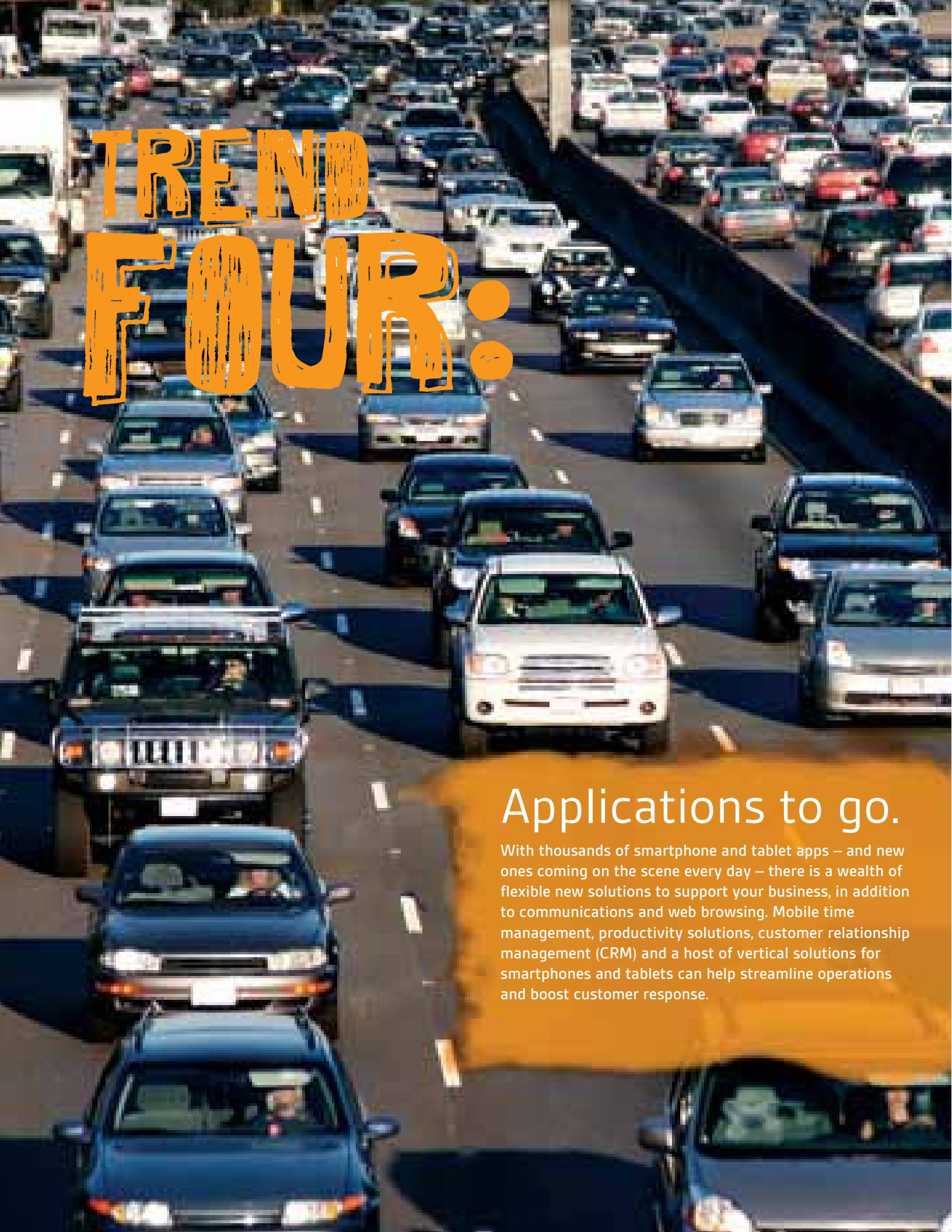


TREND THREE:

Collaboration is in the clouds.

Today's new remote computing power or cloud computing is enhancing collaboration and boosting productivity and customer support. Applications available over the Internet hosted by a third party assure that your data is always available and easily transferable among your staff in the office or on the go.

Cloud computing benefits your bottom line as well because it lowers your cost of investment. There are no capital equipment costs; all you need is a computer and Internet access. Pricing varies from free to a monthly subscription fee. Management is easy too since there's nothing to maintain and update. The range of solutions available in the cloud is growing and includes payroll, invoicing, online back-up, phone systems and more to help take your business to the next level.



TREND FOUR:

Applications to go.

With thousands of smartphone and tablet apps – and new ones coming on the scene every day – there is a wealth of flexible new solutions to support your business, in addition to communications and web browsing. Mobile time management, productivity solutions, customer relationship management (CRM) and a host of vertical solutions for smartphones and tablets can help streamline operations and boost customer response.

TREND FIVE:



Video conferencing is
as good as being there.

Whether your meeting is local or out of town, getting there is costly in time and money. With the availability of new low-cost video conferencing services that run over the Internet, you now have an affordable way to meet with customers, prospects and suppliers and remote workers.

TREND SIX:

Talk just got cheaper.

With the advent of the virtual PBX or an Internet hosted phone system, you no longer need to invest in a physical phone system. A third-party communications company can host everything for you. An Internet hosted phone system routes your calls to other phones and in some cases provides other services such as voicemail, automated voice messages and conference calling. You can cost-effectively take advantage of the Internet hosted phone services since they don't require high installation and maintenance charges.





TREND SEVEN:

Social media isn't
going away.

Still resisting Twitter or Facebook? You'll want to get on the bandwagon. Social media platforms facilitate two-way communication between you and your customer. You now can listen to your customer anytime and respond. You also can readily tell them about your latest offerings and services. By incorporating multimedia, you can boost your social marketing efforts even more. You can develop a simple online video, post it to YouTube and send it to your customers. You even can become a celebrity in cyberspace by hosting your own live radio talk show on applications such as BlogTalkRadio. Social media channels require time but otherwise are extremely cost effective; there's no expense to creating a Facebook page or Twitter account.

Choose the right technology mix

The latest technology advancements are changing the possibilities when it comes to how you run your business, connect with customers and work. Still you may be feeling that there's too much choice among the virtual cornucopia of new devices, tools and services on the market; and you may be right. Among all the new technologies, you want to choose the right mix that will streamline your business.

Spend time to assess your current technology needs keeping in mind your business plans over the next several years. As the market and your customers' needs change, you don't want to skip a beat. With the pace of technological innovation today, you won't have to when you choose technology that works for you today and paves the way to your future growth.