Mobility. Context. Social media. They’re terms that have transformed from buzzwords into bywords on the communications and IT landscape. They represent technology developments that have evolved from early-adopter challenges to mature opportunities that are becoming the core components of enterprise communications.

How will these innovations unfold in the year ahead? And what other trends will take center stage?

For the third consecutive year, we are pleased to offer our predictions for the communications industry in the months ahead, based on insights from some of the leading thinkers at Avaya on technology trends, service innovation and broad marketplace drivers. This year, we assembled a multidisciplinary group of five leaders who provided an interesting blend of perspectives.

We didn’t engage in this future thinking simply for the intellectual stimulation. Rather, it’s how we frame our discussions with clients as they conduct their annual planning, and it’s how we approach turning innovations into real-world tools. Along with guiding our own business, we hope these top 12 trends will help the broader industry bring new, powerful communications solutions to businesses everywhere.

#1: Mobility raises the expectation of availability. Being away from the office no longer means being out of touch (which can be a blessing or curse for the mobile worker). Increasingly, mobility means more than having persistent voice, e-mail, SMS text and even video connections; it’s having anywhere, anytime access to the information and applications you need to take care of business, whether it’s data at your desktop, spreadsheets on the corporate server, or customer relationship management (CRM) in the cloud. The growing pervasiveness of mobile connectivity, coupled with access to the breadth of business applications and data, is changing what consumers expect from businesses and what employers expect from their people.
#2: Contact centers test the value of voice. In today’s contact centers, where self-support, e-mail and Web chat rule, the notion of a customer calling a company with a question and easily getting the answer from a live voice seems almost quaint. But things are changing. By delivering a superior customer experience, particularly to its most valued customers, companies are finding they can create new revenue streams that more than offset the extra cost of providing a human to talk to. More companies will begin calculating where voice communications fit into their operations, using customer segmentation to determine the most valuable uses of the voice channel and how it can help retain customers.

#3: Contextual data spans the last mile of personal productivity. Every knowledge worker or road warrior knows the experience: you scramble to find a document before a conference call, or have to pull off the road to retrieve the dial-in number and passcode after being dropped from a call. Contextual data, or meta data, is information relating to a call or meeting: who the participants are, how you’ve interacted with them before, and the documents and other resources relevant to the interaction. Contextual data will increasingly accompany voice, video, chat and text communications to frame up interactions and collaboration. And with it you’ll be dialed back in automatically when you come out of that tunnel.

#4: Businesses advance from social media to social business. Achieving a million followers on your Facebook fan page is an accomplishment, but what business value does it provide? As companies mature in their use of social media, they are expanding their definition of what being a social company means and quantifying the value of their social media activities. Companies that have ventured into the social space and have the feedback to evaluate it will begin exploring how social channels can drive revenue and customer growth and contribute to business activities such as product introduction.

#5: Social media and customer care enter into an arranged marriage. The top two reasons people choose to “like” a Facebook page are quite predictable. Either they’re keeping an eye out for free products, services and other deals, or they have a problem that needs fixing. In the first instance, social media is an element of the marketing department’s promotional plan. In the second, it’s a key aspect of customer service. Leading companies will develop stronger linkages between social media operations and both marketing and customer service. As social channels become more mainstream internally, social media plans will increasingly reflect the priorities of these two core business functions.
#6: The SIP bar is raised again. Session Initiation Protocol (SIP) has been a hot trend for several years. But it has already lived up to its billing as the foundation for streamlining enterprise networks and extending advanced communications to small and medium-size businesses. So where does SIP go from here? The next stage of SIP development is the deployment of SIP-enabled applications. Mobile workforces and high-collaboration enterprises are ready markets for innovations, such as click-to-call and one-touch video, which can improve collaboration and reduce costs. Early adopters are poised to capitalize on these innovations quickly, while SIP newcomers will benefit from proven infrastructure and lower-cost deployment.

#7: Social interactions expose customer care flaws. Businesses can’t fake their way through social interactions. A company that commits to the social media space is going to expose its core—its mission, its values and its attitude toward its customers and employees. Some companies are avoiding social media engagement in hopes of avoiding this new vulnerability. But there’s no place to hide. Produce a shoddy product or provide bad customer service, and social media will expose it. Companies that are succeeding in social media have a culture of open communication. They will encourage and equip their people to represent the enterprise in the social media world.

#8: IT support staffs converge, part 2. Many companies converged their voice and data support teams years ago with the advent of Internet Protocol (IP) telephony. New challenges will arise as this blending continues with the deployment of unified communications applications. Application workflows may require several steps to troubleshoot a problem, driving the need to converge skills again. The benefits of converged IT staff can include quicker diagnosis and resolution. But how much can one person handle? And when is a company relying on too many people? Companies will strive for the right balance.

#9: Continuous connectivity drives communications support services. Most live technical support for communications systems is delivered by phone today. But a shift is under way in support organizations to solve problems proactively, incorporating live interaction in innovative, multimedia Web environments—for example, intelligent engines that can perform structured diagnoses, as well as advanced approaches to capturing, managing and reusing enterprise knowledge. Raw connectivity is the first requirement for all of these capabilities, achieved by having the necessary bandwidth and allowing vendor support teams to connect through firewalls with secure access links. As Web environments
become richer, engineers will be able to “swarm” a customer problem using real-time video and other tools. Web environments will also allow companies to reach out to peers for support in dealing with implementations and other issues.

#10: Clients take control of managed services. IT management is complex, whether companies have large IT staffs or rely heavily on vendors. IT departments will become more discriminating in the services they purchase as they better understand leading practices in infrastructure management. They will increasingly adopt third-party IT management tools. And they will become more informed about the right type of managed service provider for their needs, the degree of transparency they require, and how they will hold providers accountable.

#11: Unified communications (UC) managed services/outsourcing facilitates alignment between IT and business units. IT organizations fall into one of three categories: they actually are good at managing their IT infrastructure and applications; they think they’re good at it but they’re not; or they simply know they’re not. As business-unit demands for IT and communications services grow at an accelerating clip, IT departments will increasingly seek to understand where they lie on this continuum. Making that determination will require a realistic self-assessment. IT may be confident in its own abilities, but how in touch are they with the lines of business they serve and the strategic and financial considerations of the enterprise? Close partnering with business unit and executive leaders will be critical to selecting the right path and resources.

#12: “True” UC apps proliferate. Technology users are no longer waiting for IT to provide the productivity tools they need. If you want proof, consider two words: smartphones, tablets. Users now want the ability to communicate using the devices and media they choose, from phones, to operating systems, to conferencing platforms. And they can back up their demands with stories and data on the productivity gains they achieve. IT departments will be compelled by business units and enterprise users to adopt more user-centric applications and devices, with unified communications solutions providing both the connecting fabric and necessary security.

How will these trends play out in 2012? Certainly some will accelerate. Others will lag. And some will unfold about as we expect. Only one thing is certain: it’s going to be another eventful year in communications.
The trend spotters

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Mike Runda recently joined Avaya as vice president of service delivery. He previously served as CEO of the KCS Academy, an organization focused on improving the customer’s support experience and support organization efficiency, and he has led global support for technology companies including Intuit, Symantec and Oracle.

Ravi Sethi is president of Avaya Labs. In this role, he leads a thriving organization that conducts leading-edge research and works with real-world customer scenarios to accelerate product innovation and mitigate technical risk.