



● ● Photo courtesy of XTAR

The special forces customer ● ●

Successful organizations focus on the needs of their customer. This should be true especially when your customer includes the special forces. Communications is a vital piece of equipment, determining mission success or failure. Philip Harlow, President and COO of XTAR, explains the necessity in understanding and meeting the unique communication needs of the special forces user.

The furthest forward of his battalion, the soldier in the Observation Post (OP) spots movement to his front. He watches for a moment, then reaches up and flicks the switch and hears the soft whine as the batteries send power to the sensors. He sees movement - there! His night vision goggles tell him that some unknown person - make that people - are moving, slowly, left to right from his point of view, but moving with purpose. Heading that way, where hopefully another operator will pick them up and track them further, he counts, "four, five, six..." as the white figures move across his NVG lens. Time to call it in.

As a satellite communications provider, this special forces user is our consumer. He is technically not our customer as he has not made the purchasing decisions for the equipment and technology that he will use to complete his mission. Yet, he is required to complete this mission using what he was provided.

The *customer* versus *consumer* distinction here is important. Think of a company that makes breakfast cereal for kids. While the parent is the customer and makes the purchasing decisions, it would be ludicrous for the manufacturer to consider only the parent's preferences when producing the cereal. A simple example, but it illustrates our point.

Like many in the world of defense contractors, we do not sell directly to the consumer, such as the special forces user in our example above. In fact, we do not always have the opportunity to speak directly to this user to completely understand his challenges and requirements.

How then are satellite services procured to solve the challenges of our special forces user? Usually, this is done in one of two ways:

One: The Technical Contact as Customer

Understandably, satellite communications often move into a

technical sell with graphs, charts and lots of data. The well-informed purchaser will work to understand these figures while considering the wider scope of requirements. While the technology may look good on paper, how it works in the field is the ultimate test. Two examples:

Misleading availability. Capacity is bought, but when a user attempts to gain satellite service on WGS, or other government-owned satellite, they are not given the amount they need at the time they need. Or, they gain access only to then be bumped off by a higher priority user. Frustrated and needing communications, the user moves to Ku-band, which appears to have capacity, but may not be reliable. Our user soon finds himself competing for service with a commercial user and may get outbid for capacity.

Interference. Capacity is bought and the user has access, but due to adjacent satellite interference (ASI) which often occurs in Ku-band, the user's signal is completely disrupted. A small antenna is a must-have for our special forces user, but this operates at a higher power density which in some frequencies increases risk of ASI.

Two: The Program Office as Customer

When selling to the program office, the focus is on budget and pricing. Often, the program office does not even have a budget for commercial space, which makes the sell here especially difficult. Where there is budget, the biggest concern is pricing. It's hard to deny the importance placed on budgets in today's environment, but looking at pricing on its own is a mistake. Two examples:

Purchase options. Many in the industry believe that there is only one way to buy satellite communications, without examining their options. 'Pay as you go' services do not always exist, but where they do, they are beneficial, liberating the

program office from making a long-term commitment while allowing an opportunity for the technology to be trialed.

Efficiencies. Efficiencies must be compared when weighing options as a lower price may be deceptive. In one experience, we found that potential customers were looking at cost differences between frequencies without considering the higher efficiencies realized with X-band. What they perceived to be a higher cost solution was actually lower cost overall as less bandwidth was required using X-band.

The Special Forces User as Customer

For satellite communications providers, our special forces user is technically our consumer. But what would happen if we treated them as a customer? Any responsive company works hard to understand the pain points or challenges that their customer faces. If we look back at our user, we must consider the stress and potential danger that comes with degraded communications, intermittent communications or no communications at all.

With that in mind, what would our special forces user consider the most important priorities to consider when designing and implementing satellite service, if it were their decision to make? In our experiences, as both the seller and the user in the field, these are the top three:

- **Mobility:** I need something compatible with small antennas. I change position a lot and need technology that will support this.
- **Flexibility:** What are my options for utilizing commercially available X-band? If I cannot access government-owned satellite, I need an alternative that is easy and quick.
- **Reliability:** Most importantly, our special forces user has to have the confidence that the system will work.
 - o I'm transmitting high definition video. Will my message go through?
 - o Will I lose signal in a storm?
 - o Will my message be secure?

A good satellite communications provider will work towards satisfying customer requirements. A great satellite provider will do this while looking to the end consumer with a relentless

dedication to understanding their challenges and needs, including cost. For our guy in the field, he simply wants a solution that is easy to get and easy to use.

This consumer, the special forces user, simply wants the knowledge and confidence that his communications will work. His focus, whether it is securing a border or completing a critical task, is on his mission, and our focus as providers should be to ensure that no matter what, his message goes through. After all, isn't that why we are in this business?

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