



Insider Perspectives

Where and why are Irish businesses investing in 2017?

The survey says...



In July 2016, Three surveyed Irish small to medium size enterprises (SMEs) to get a better understanding of their shifting priorities and strategic plans for next year. The survey revealed that the top areas of investment heading into 2017 are:



Marketing & Sales Programs



Collaboration Improvements



Operations Systems & Infrastructure Improvements

But why are these the priorities for Irish SMEs? To get answers, Three interviewed industry veterans who have their finger on the pulse of Irish business and technology. Based on their perspectives, this eGuide explores the reasoning behind these priorities and offers insight into technologies that are worth a careful look in 2017.

Meet the experts.

John Kennedy is an award-winning journalist at Silicon Republic. He is a recipient of the Irish Internet Association NetVisionary Technology Journalist Award 2005 and the David Manley Award 2011. Siliconpublic.com has won the Irish Web Awards' Best Technology Site seven times.

Padraig Sheerin is Head of SME at Three. He is an entrepreneurial leader with a proven track record of commercial results and strategic and operational management success. He has 18 years of experience in telecommunications for SMEs.

John O'Sullivan is a Business Specialists Manager at Three. He has 18 years' experience in telecommunications, having previously served in the Irish Defence Forces Communications Corps, Interroute Ireland, Digifone, O2 and Telefónica.

Colin Ashmore is a Unified Communications & Data Solutions Architect at Three. He works directly with customers across Ireland to design ICT solutions that will enable their growth and success and remain flexible to changing business needs.

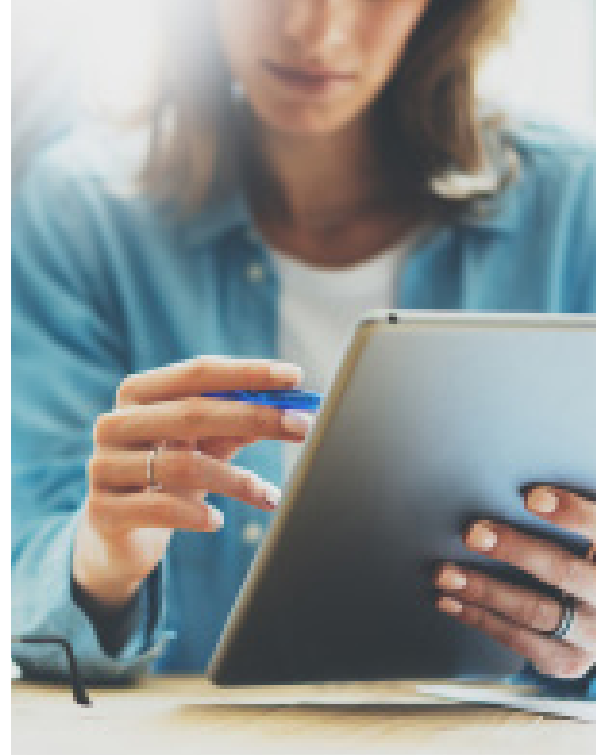
Why are these priorities for 2017?

We asked the experts and they confirmed that our survey results were consistent with what they see in the field.

However, they pointed out that these priorities are not new; they would have been seen before investment slowed in 2008/2009. During the recessionary years that followed, the only topic in every sector was cost reduction—protect the core and do more with less. Now, SMEs are once again feeling optimistic and looking to invest.

Today, it's clear that stakes have been raised in the areas of security, cloud technology and digital connectivity. Collaboration is a topic nearly every business is talking about, and cultivating lasting relationships with customers is the new competitive battleground. Companies now strive to differentiate through more contextual, personally relevant marketing as well as improvements to customer service and overall customer experience.

Another big shift is the recognition that marketing and sales outcomes are often directly related to the infrastructure and technology systems in place. Unfortunately, hesitancy to invest in such systems during the downturn meant that many SMEs were not in a position to take advantage of the recent appetite for online purchasing. The survey results acknowledge that businesses are now eager to get back up to speed in that arena.



“10 years ago businesses were less disciplined in their spending. Now they’re more strategic, and they expect vendors to act like partners in that endeavour.”

—John O’Sullivan, Three

How big a factor is the cloud?

Adoption of cloud technology has reached its tipping point. The cost of services is down and network speeds are way up. With providers offering one-stop solutions at competitive prices, customers receive better end-to-end services as well as quicker, more accurate issue resolution. The low overhead of cloud-based solutions is also a major factor driving adoption.

Four years ago, managed services and cloud were not an easy sell. Now businesses come asking for them. They understand that what they're getting is actually more secure than on-premise systems, where people are the weakest link.

What are the areas of focus for marketing and sales programs?

These days, Irish companies are looking for mass-market penetration; nearly all are looking to grow.

Startups and small SMEs are also seeking ways to look and act bigger.

Retail is especially keen to invest in infrastructure and operations systems that can help them activate customer data and leverage data services to find, reach and engage new customers. Most retail stores provide free Wi-Fi, not only because customers want it, but because they're capturing profile details that can be used to make marketing hyper-relevant, and even run flash instore promotions based on real-time location data. For example, a free coffee offer that expires in minutes or a 20% discount at a hair salon for shopping centre visitors.



“Customers understand that we can make them far more resilient in our cloud than in their own environment.”

—Colin Ashmore, Three

SMEs want to tap real-time data in order to deliver a more customised experience. Not only has the technology become easier to use, important challenges have been solved, including the ability to keep communications safe and appropriate for minors.

Of course, infrastructure and services that support marketing are not just for retail. Systems that gather demographic and behavioural information based on data from mobile networks help to identify where people are in a buying cycle. Cloud telecom service providers are then able to help businesses reach a highly targeted audience through SMS or other mobile apps.

What's driving the desire for better collaboration through technology?

Collaboration technology has been around for the larger part of the last decade. What's driving the renewed interest is the increasing accessibility to quality, internet-based video combined with the power of face-to-face communication. Live chat is now an easy alternative to a phone call and can cultivate an even more personalised customer experience. You are meeting your customer where they are, creating empathy and deepening customer relationships.

Video collaboration makes customer consulting, internal training and partnering on projects measurably more effective. Your business will save time, costs and, ultimately, serve your customers better. Perhaps the most obvious example is in healthcare. When practitioners can collaborate as if they were in the same room, the impact on quality of care is literally life changing.

Contact centres, instant messaging and presence, intelligent SMS, webcasts and many more all reduce the cost of collaborative communication when compared to traditional outbound calling. In any case, whether you're investing in a complex CRM system or a simple project management program, it's important that all collaboration tools are enjoyable to use and appeal to the younger workforce. Relevancy is a must for companies trying to grow.



“Companies should look to have better conversations with customers, and that’s enabled by these technologies.”

—John Kennedy, Silicon Republic

What are the focus points for systems and infrastructure investments in 2017?

More than the obvious need to upgrade and integrate hardware and software, our experts believe security is a top concern and one of the primary lenses through which businesses are looking at technology investment. SMEs are familiar with stories of ransomware attacks and data breaches, and are more aware than ever of the risks of a poor security infrastructure.

There is still some reluctance in Irish SMEs to go completely digital — even as paperless solutions solve many of the compliance risks of paper-dependent operations.

It's common now for businesses to give employees smartphones that connect remotely to company systems, such as email, CRM, even mission critical servers. How many are lost in taxis or left behind at restaurants? The potential for a breach is there. It's manageable, of course, if you have secure technologies in place. Newer tech has the edge on security — especially cloud tech because of its ability to adapt quickly.

Infrastructure investment is often about efficiency as well as security. Operational systems and workflow applications that can integrate with the salesforce in the field and get orders out to customers quickly— with minimal human involvement—are key drivers.



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—Padraig Sheerin, Three

What technologies should Irish SMEs keep their eye on?

Our experts get excited when businesses embrace innovation and utilise tech to make meaning out of data and create better connections with customers.



Wi-Fi. Businesses are seeking infrastructure changes that excite customers, deepen relationships, open up conversations and personalise the experience.



Telephony. Still vitally important, despite the fact it is now just one type of communication for the customer whose journey may cross a number of touch-points. Whether it's via the website, phone or social media, savvy businesses are tracking that journey to provide a consistent experience for their customer.



Machine to machine (M2M). A Wi-Fi-enabled, embedded SIM card makes it possible for a fridge to communicate temperature through a service that can make decisions around food storage. The opportunities are endless.



Mobile APIs. Platforms like Apple Pay allow SMEs to run businesses from a phone. Financial apps are so simple yet robust that companies can operate leaner and invest that money in mission-centric areas.



Virtual reality (VR). Estate agents offer VR home tours before people make the trip in person. The same is happening in the automotive and fashion industries. Will Irish businesses take VR to the next level and across industries to education, healthcare and more?



Invisible interface. The future of computing is off screen as tech like Amazon Echo takes hold. Computers will drift into the background, providing help as needed, almost taken for granted in our daily lives.



Artificial intelligence (AI). Technology that can learn is going to play a big part in getting simple tasks done. Combining this with super-fast, low-latency mobile networks will enable the services of the future.

What's the takeaway?

Across every sector, technology will play a critical role in attracting and retaining customers. It's time to upgrade business systems and embrace new marketing and collaboration possibilities.

More helpful resources



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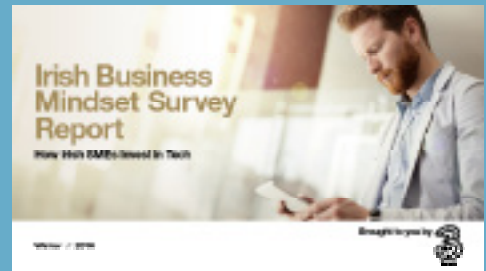
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Inside the Irish Business Mindset

You can't escape technology's impact on business. Learn more about how Irish SMEs prioritise technology investments.

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