

Futurist Envisions a Whole New Business World



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by DEBORAH YOUNG

Wireless Review Dr. James Canton imagines driving through a familiar street in San Francisco and having his thoughts interrupted by a wireless device. The scenario would play out something like this. "Your friend Sally is in a Star-bucks three blocks away," the device says.

"Find her cell-phone number in my personal directory and give her a call, please," he orders, to which the gadget complies.

After Canton makes plans with Sally, the device adds the appointment to his calendar.

This scenario depicts what Canton, Institute for Global Futures president, refers to as hybrid teleservices.

An author and entrepreneur, Canton predicts high-tech trends. The services he envisions in this case would feature artificial intelligence and personalized applications, be accessible from various types of devices, and be capable of receiving information in real time.

The gist of the futurist's vision is that a profound change is coming in terms of how humans interact with machines. Until now, people have struggled to comprehend technology, Canton said during his keynote address at GTE Telecommunication Services' Solutions 2000 conference in August.

"The next 25 years are going to be about technology understanding

us,” he said.

Canton also foresees a transformation of how businesses and consumers interact. He predicts that buyers will usurp power over sellers, using Web sites such as priceline.com to demand desirable prices and product attributes. Companies would then bid for the opportunity to provide the specified products and services.

“We’re going to see the death of fixed prices,” Canton asserted. About 20% of the employees in every major industry will see the death of their jobs, Canton predicted, using the travel industry as an example of how and why jobs will be lost.

The Internet has made it possible for consumers to bypass travel agents by conducting online searches for inexpensive fares and hotel accommodations that meet their specific criteria. Also, many of the hotels and transportation companies built their own Websites and began refusing to pay commissions to the travel agents. As a result, some of the agents were thrust out of work.

The moral, Canton said, is that businesses either will adapt or die. For providers, adapting means assessing how Internet-savvy your networks are and developing an understanding of your customers’ needs and expectations.

“Customers don’t care about architecture. They do care about the integration of services,” Canton said. “Being able to understand how customers are driving your business is mission-critical. It’s all about shaping the customer’s experience.”

One way customers can impact wireless businesses is by demanding more bandwidth. Canton forecasts a 300% increase in bandwidth demand during the next year.

“Bandwidth as a competitive weapon will be critical to a company’s e-business,” he said.

Canton also predicted that by 2004, 40% of consumers would be shopping online via some type of electronic device. But he admits

that, in an era of quick-paced technological advances, the telecommunications industry faces many unknowns.

“What you’ll be selling in five years has not been invented yet,” he told the Solutions 2000 audience.

According to Canton, the industry still has a long way to go.

“Three-quarters of the world has not made its first phone call,” he said.