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Think like a customer to sell to the military, Marine colonel says

By BRADLEY J. FIKES

SAN DIEGO ---- Think of the average soldier as your customer. That's the best way to sell technology to the military, said Marine Col. Jay Bruder, chief of staff for a Camp Pendleton-based Marine unit which recently returned from Iraq.

Bruder described his experiences handling the information technology needs of the I Marine Expeditionary Force at a Tuesday breakfast meeting hosted by the San Diego Telecom Council. The meeting was held to give companies an insight into how technology is applied in war.

Bruder's message: Market forces rule in military purchases, so customer satisfaction should be the top priority. That means technology should be ready to deploy, simple to use and should provide obvious benefits to the soldiers who use it, Bruder said, speaking to about 100 executives at University Towne Center.

Bruder illustrated his points with anecdotes on what Marines and Army soldiers liked and didn't liked about their high-tech equipment in Iraq. Whiz-bang features aren't necessarily appealing, Bruder said.

"We don't begin to use all the applications we already have," he said.

Bruder said market forces were the deciding factor in an Army/Marines rivalry over two systems used in Iraq to track their units. The Marines used a system that had the most features, but took a long time to boot up and was complicated to use. The Army used one that was easy to use and booted up instantly, although it had fewer features.

Troops on the ground in both services opted for the system the Army was using, known as Blue Force Tracking, Bruder said. In combat, quick and reliable were preferable to high-powered and cumbersome, he added.

Blue Force Tracking won acclaim for its accuracy in distinguishing friend from foe, avoiding casualties from friendly fire. As a result, the Army and Marines are working on a hybrid system, based on Blue Force Tracking, Bruder said.

Even a seemingly trivial technology such as Web chat rooms, like those by America Online, proved extremely useful in Iraq, Bruder said.

Chat worked because the encrypted text messages could be seen by all authorized users at the same time, saving time in getting out information and coordinating action, Bruder said. Also, the chat messages could be scrolled back and forth across a monitor in the order in which they were sent. Bruder said this ability to "go back in time" and see what had been previously discussed allowed latecomers to the "conversation" to catch up without having to ask for information.

Bruder said that even initial skeptics of Web chat became fans once they saw how much easier and faster it made the task of coordinating action in battle.

The military is looking for ready-to-go technologies, said Susan L. Alderson, a science adviser to the Camp Pendleton expeditionary force. Alderson said the military wants companies to offer products that are easily fitting into its existing infrastructure, or even several products from different companies designed to work together.

"What we're really asking for is not bits and pieces, but to integrate what you have," Alderson said. "That takes us time and money, and we don't have either one of those things right now."