

New Focus for Wireless Data

a report by

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Many operators are still investing on a technological level rather than on fulfilling the customer requirements that they ultimately aim to serve. Marketing departments have long been the bane of the information technology (IT) and network organisation, demanding support for consumer-focused services. The frantic activity surrounding content rating prior to the launch of multimedia messaging-based services is an example of a classic approach, based on functionality rather than proactive consumer assessment. Content rating has been a subject for discussion by operators and billing vendors, but it is the context in which consumers use, or will want to use, data services that requires serious attention.

There is much discussion about how to price and promote GPRS and multimedia messaging services (MMS) and make them understandable to the subscriber. There is also talk about prepaid as a payment method, rather than a type of subscriber. This is because it is anticipated that many contract subscribers will want a flexible payment method for 'premium' data offerings conducted in realtime to allow them greater spending control and maximum user satisfaction. For example, advice of charge will be critical before a service is ordered, particularly in the premium messaging environment.

Realtime prepaid charging offered to (traditionally) pre- or post-paid subscribers is also attractive to network operators. It represents less of a credit risk, in terms of service provision and content value, as the services are paid for up front. Realtime rating can also alleviate the prepaid fraud window that exists with 'hot' billing. New legal guidelines implemented in recent months mean that, in some countries, negative prepaid balance recovery at recharge is against the law.

The focus of many operators on extracting maximum value from their subscribers, e.g. while roaming, further escalates the need for operators to implement an effective realtime prepaid billing solution now. Operators should not limit service offerings and, hence, their chances of improving customer satisfaction and loyalty due to limitations within their prepaid billing systems.

The common denominator in all of this is the consumer. The basic marketing approach of understanding your customer's needs has taken a back seat. In the world of fast-moving consumer goods, customer relationship management (CRM) systems evolved to collect information about individual and collective consumer spending based on traditional demographics. An analysis of any operator network infrastructure shows that, today, an infinite amount of data is produced and then almost immediately lost. This is either because its relevance is not understood, it is not captured in realtime or the concept of actually collecting the data from various sources and aggregating it would give even the most conscientious network designer nightmares.

It is increasingly difficult to find new ways of retaining clients, which is made more challenging by such elements as mobile number portability (number pooling). The industry is trying to retaliate with targeted marketing campaigns and new packages of services in an attempt to retain its most lucrative customers. This is in conjunction with billion dollar investments in new technology and training to improve customer care IT infrastructure and procedures. Customer loyalty has become a business critical success factor.

While many network operators have invested heavily in new CRM systems, these were not built with their specific needs in mind, as they revolve around voice services rather than data services. Taking into consideration that it is primarily data services that are helping operators to consolidate declining average revenue per user, the extent of the challenge is clear. Today, it is nearly impossible to identify the most relevant pieces of data in one's network, let alone access this data and use it to attract and retain customers profitably.

There are two key areas that operators can look at to address this: prepayment and data intelligence.

Prepayment is still almost exclusively controlled by integrated network (IN) platforms, which are rapidly expanding the original voice service into a data-

centric offering. Customer care systems traditionally do not have a connection to IN platforms unless this is performed via mediation, which does not allow realtime access. The consumer experience related to service blockage and negative balance recovery are areas in which realtime access and control not only protect the operator but also safeguard the customer care environment from unnecessary 'fire fighting'. For example, a television programme (using short message service (SMS) voting) recently profiled in the UK media identified a problem that arose initially due to a software error. It was, however, the duplicate payments, subsequent credits and the overload on the Customer Care Centre that caused the most distress to the operator.

Interactive services such as SMS-TV place the greatest demand on delivery systems. The example highlights why data on consumer traffic levels versus system capacity must be available in near realtime to ensure service quality, stability and a positive customer experience. The consumer 'wow factor' is the one thing that can help operators minimise churn and maximise loyalty. As subscribers increasingly make buying decisions on the perceived differences in customer care, impressing the customer will become a key differentiator among competitors.

Examples such as sending SMS messages to customers for Christmas instead of traditional greetings cards, or developing specific packages for individual market segments or their own 'personalised brand' backed by end-to-end marketing campaigns are making headway in the customer loyalty realm.

Creating the right impression can also make customers more accepting of service shortcomings. Moreover, they allow operators to learn from their customers and to customise their offers. Attentive and personalised customer care and new and improved services (and quality of service) along with more focused marketing tactics can all contribute to this new customer experience.

Messaging vendors already offer solutions for realtime payment and data intelligence, so that operators can identify and deliver reliable, consumer-driven services for data users, as well as choice of payment methods. The ability to deliver the ultimate consumer experience will, without a doubt, determine the winners in the operator arena. While operators are understandably excited about the potential of MMS, they can also tap into the potential of what is available in the wireless data (messaging) environment today – services such as premium SMS – that consumers have shown they want and are using right now. ■



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