



Paying Lip Service to Service Quality

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Prod any large business, and you'll usually find that wonderfully intangible word "quality" lurking around in corporate mission statements or on the company's web page. Like a lot of the words that have ended up as part of the Emperor's New Clothes for management consultants and business schools, it has a nice reassuring sound to it – even though no-one's quite exactly sure what it means in practice. At the very least, you can't imagine any CEO not wanting "quality" sprinkled liberally throughout his or her company's literature, and invoked on every possible occasion.

However, the trouble that the telecommunications industry has – and it's already starting to impact cash flows and reputations – is that there's an ever-widening gulf between all the focused hype about Quality that regularly and inevitably infects corporations in occasional Dilbert-esque fads, and the actual reality that customers experience.

The traditional telecommunications industry always prided itself on fulfilling a few strict service quality criteria, mainly based around the reliability of a very few basic connectivity services. The result has been the telephone becoming a largely invisible, but ubiquitous tool – and we're only really aware of it when it stops working. The fact that network failure is an extremely rare occurrence in any developed country is a testament to the continued intelligent obsession of our engineering community with underlying network quality.

That culture of quality is now being eroded. The QoS techniques and disciplines that served the telecommunications business well during its fixed line and early mobile days are now coming under increasing pressure to perform in an entirely new environment – and first reports indicate that they're not up to the job.

As the telecommunications industry finally takes its long awaited first steps toward bringing content and applications to customers through 2.5G, 3G and WiFi services, so too do operators increase their exposure to risk, loss of money and customers and longer-term credibility as trusted service providers. Almost overnight, we're suddenly going to be judged by customers on a whole range of different criteria, above and beyond basic voice quality.

Did my music track download okay? Did my friends get my MMS? Did my ticket purchase go through? These are just a few of the questions that millions of mobile phone users around the world are starting to ask themselves. In an ideal world they'd have sufficient trust in their service provider not to have to worry about such things.

Unfortunately, quality has all too often been seen as an intangible, vaguely amorphous factor in defining commercial relationships. Millions of words may have been expended on the subject, from the early thoughts of US pioneer Dr W



Edwards Deming, through to all the work on ISO 9001 and BS5750 in recent years. All of this work has attempted to codify core quality principles and translate these into working practices, but the sad truth in many industries is that there remains a yawning gap between ambition and reality.

The telecommunications industry in particular, has put a lot of effort into defining these problems, as highlighted by standardisation work from the ITU-T, ETSI and the TeleManagement Forum. However, even the ITU-T recognises that there are problems even in the most basic vocabulary of quality. "The term QoS is extensively used today... however, the term QoS is usually not well defined, is used loosely, or worst of all, misused" reads the ITU-T G.1000 document.

What can the mobile communications industry do to change? Look at what's historically happened within mobile service providers when the subject of QoS comes up for discussion. Almost inevitably, given the strength of tradition in most operator companies, it's identified as a network engineering problem – and so given to the network operations manager as yet another responsibility. Given that this individual and his team have enough on their plate just rolling out new sites and ensuring that the new network doesn't fall over as new services and content come on line, and it's easy to see why 'lip service' is an appropriate term to apply to the attention given to the subject.

Service quality is a board level issue and, as such, it should receive full recognition and support at board level. It is not, primarily, a technical problem, but a commercial one that should involve the whole organisation. While internal departments will continue to fight their own battles and protect their turf, they should realise that it's not their CEO who's at the apex of the commercial pyramid – it's their customer.

There's a useful comparison to be made here with information security. Long seen as the domain of the nerds and experts by most board members – and often a hindrance to new initiatives, forever crying wolf in the face of possible threats – recent high level attacks and new corporate governance laws have ensured that IT security issues now have a seat at the highest table.

The same has to happen with QoS issues. Only by taking a truly holistic approach to the problem and combining mechanical QoS techniques and the engineering skills and expertise of the network experts with other departments will true Service Quality Management principles be implemented. At the end of the day, words and promises are cheap – but only changes in the real world will bring real results.