

## Making the Customer Experience Count

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Exposed to constant innovations and new service experiences on the Internet, consumers have raised their expectations when it comes to their telecom services, making a focus on the customer experience a strategic imperative for communication service providers (CSPs). Customers – consumer or enterprise – want personalization, flexibility, quality, and innovation from their CSPs. They also want the freedom to choose what services to use, when and how to use them, as well as the ability to set price controls and payment methods. And if they can't get them from their CSP, there are plenty of nimble new players in the market just waiting for the chance to pounce.

CSPs have the necessary assets to optimize the customer experience. These include rich customer information, extremely personalized communications channels, and sophisticated networks. As the rules of the game change, CSPs must find the best way to leverage these assets in



order to become more insightful, agile and effective in the way they interact with customers.

Coupled with an increase in customer expectations is an increase in bandwidth usage. In 2010 the worldwide 3G customer base is expected to surpass one billion subscribers. Smart devices, advanced networks and more sophisticated applications are driving mobile broadband use around the globe. As 4G/LTE/IMS networks begin to roll out, subscribers will be accessing multiple services within a single session, performing on-demand content downloads, and expecting service continuity across devices and networks. Along

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with the excitement of this uptake, has come the realization on the part of many CSPs that flat-rate pricing approaches are not sustainable. Of course, consumers have become comfortable with “all you can eat”, so careful navigation through pricing policy change is needed.

How can CSPs capitalize on the mobile broadband uptake, while also enhancing their customers’ experiences? The answer lies in “smart charging” - charging based not only on changes in network conditions, content, or time of day, but charging that also considers customer status (e.g. VIP), account balance, overall service plan (e.g. multi-product discounts) and the like.

This multi-dimensional approach also gives CSPs more power to provide customers with relevant choices and incentives, as well as proactively prevent negative customer experiences. For example, let’s say a premium subscriber is attempting to stream a video during off-peak hours. From the CSP’s point of view, this is desired behavior. Thus, the subscriber’s behavior could be encouraged by offering a temporary bandwidth boost at a discounted rate. Or, consider the case

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where a subscriber is close to reaching her data plan quota. In this case, the service provider could send an SMS notification to warn the customer and to avoid bill shock at the end of the month. Alternatively, the provider could use this opportunity to promote an upgrade to a more relevant data plan, or offer an option to pay for additional data usage via a pay-as-you-go model.

All of these customer-friendly scenarios are made possible when BSS and policy management systems work in harmony. Of course, in all of this, a key to navigating away from “all you can eat” is the ability to allow customers to manage their accounts.

Most consumers do not think about how many

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bytes are used while web browsing or sending emails. This has led to bill shock for some subscribers on usage-based data plans. Allowing customers to set limits on their account – or on certain parts of their accounts – is critical to

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satisfaction. Limits should be able to be set not only on monetary spend, but on a per unit basis if desired. For example, a parent may want limit a child’s portion of their account to one view download per day, or only during certain hours. Account controls should obviously be easy to set and change – through whichever method the customer prefers: web, device, call center, kiosk.

While this all may sound intuitive, and certainly messaging around “the customer experience” has been loud for awhile, why do customer satisfaction results for some telecomm operators remain low? Why do operators themselves admit – when surveyed recently by UK-based telecommunications analyst firm Telesperience – that the biggest contributor to a sub-optimal customer experience is lack of cross-channel consistency?

Most CSPs still rely on a patchwork of discrete legacy systems – or silos. In a siloed world, rich customer data within the BSS ecosystem becomes fragmented; creating effective links between BSS and the network is immensely challenging. Multiple, disconnected views of subscriber and product information diminishes the customer experience. Lack of a strong BSS/network link impedes a “smart charging” approach. An ecosystem comprised of multiple silos makes it impossible to deliver a responsive, meaningful customer experience. Siloed ecosystems also force continued reliance on the flat-rate, “all-

you-can-eat” approach to billing, particularly across converged services. In a siloed world, the many dimensions to policy are haphazard, uncoordinated, or even conflicting. This results in lost opportunities both for increased revenues and positive customer interactions.

As an alternative, an end-to-end approach that synchronizes customer and product data with the network enables “smart charging”. Equally important, a single real-time customer view is the necessary foundation for delivery of a consistent customer experience. When this holistic view of the subscriber is blended with network knowledge and backed by a multi-dimensional approach to policy, CSPs can also maximize the business potential of next-generation networks through:

- Development of innovative business models (e.g., personalized context-aware charging)
- Subscriber-driven policy controls (e.g., spending limits)
- Customer-centric offers (e.g., sharing of minutes and services)

The ability to structure these types of creative plans and business models with the appropriate policies wrapped around them not only empowers customers, but also ultimately leads to increased revenues.

While most CSPs recognize that siloed, heavily customized environments are ill-equipped to support the ubiquitous real-time nature of next-generation data services and cannot sustain future business growth, many are reluctant to move away from silos and towards convergent policy-based BSS because their existing legacy architecture remains crucial for day-to-day operations. These operators could benefit from the learnings of operators globally who have adopted convergent BSS systems and are reaping the results:

- A convergent CSP in Poland is supporting bandwidth management with authorization, rating and charging policies to decrease bandwidth when a subscriber - regardless of payment type - has reached a certain threshold. This has freed

**A leading CSP in India is measuring real-time subscriber usage to trigger discount policies, increasing revenues.**

network capacity while encouraging subscribers to recharge for increased bandwidth access.

- A leading CSP in Europe is mixing prepaid and postpaid concepts and real-time balance management to provide access to high quality services (to all subscribers) by carefully extending credit up to certain limits (then requiring a recharge). Customer response has been positive as shown by a significant increase in service uptake.

- A leading CSP in India is measuring real-time subscriber usage to trigger discount policies, increasing revenues.

Moving to a fully convergent BSS linked with policy capabilities can certainly be done in phases, as is currently being done by several Western European multi-play providers. A phased approach is achievable with the right product-based solution approach backed by extensive deployment expertise.

The CSPs referenced above understand that open, standards-compliant BSS that sit in the network, are linked with policy, and are adaptable to new business models are the way to capitalize on their greatest assets - networks and customer information – to create the ultimate customer experience. They are making the customer experience count. Shouldn't you do the same?