PipelinePub.com

June, 2006 | Volume 3, Issue 1

Keeping it all in Check

The Vital Role of OSS in Taming Commercial Services

By: Kerbey Altmann, Director - OSS Voice Architecture, Sigma Systems;
With Roger Thompson, Technology Advisor Wireline Solutions, Nortel

According to Cable Datacomm News, the market for commercial telecom services is estimated at more than $120 billion dollars. It is also estimated that cable operators stand to earn more than $1 billion dollars this year from commercial services offerings.

Beyond the numbers, the impetus for operators to launch is straightforward – commercial markets represent a largely untapped audience from which operators can generate new revenue streams and subscriber growth. As various telephony operators have found for years, commercial customers also tend to produce more significant profit margins than do residential subscribers. It may also be argued that with major ILECs investing heavily in bundled DSL offerings and triple-play roll outs to compete head-on with cable, an aggressive entrance into commercial markets stands as a logical counterstroke for MSOs to combat ILECs in their traditional domains.

Looking deeper into the competitive landscape, it becomes apparent that taking on ILECs in the large enterprise segment is not the most sensible first step. Though there may be such opportunities in the long term, in the short term such a strategy would not be feasible due to the complexity of requirements, geographic range of the customer, and provider loyalty or contractual obligation. Further, many large enterprise locations – particularly those based in industrial and commercial zones – are not immediately accessible to existing cable plant.

For years, however, ILECs have overlooked small and medium businesses in their effort to focus on large enterprises. For a large, slow-moving ILEC, small and medium businesses represent a difficult challenge because of their need for personalized support and more flexible service offerings. In most cases, the heavy-duty transport ILECs offer is overkill for such customers, and their lack of attention on customer experience is a hindrance. Just as some CLECs - for whom the regulatory playing field has changed - have found success meeting the needs of small and medium businesses, cable operators have a similar opportunity. Many of these businesses – everything from car dealerships and doctors' offices to hotels and retail outlets – are within range of or already served by existing cable plant. Working in the MSOs favor are today's developments in IP-based technologies that can deliver services tailored to small and medium businesses' specific needs and advanced OSS solutions that enable high levels of automation, personalization and customer control.

Business Customers Raise the Stakes

Though several MSOs have experience servicing commercial customers based on a CLEC model, it's worthwhile to consider the differences between a residential customer's requirements and expectations and those of even a small or home-based business. The difference boils down to more stringent demands for quality, reliability, diagnosis and resolution of problems, and customer experience. Security can also enter the picture, particularly in a world where people are

more sensitive to issues of personal identity and information security than ever before. While meeting customer requirements is critical, exceeding them –and surpassing competitors' ability to do so - can break the market wide open. From this perspective, the entire customer experience becomes a critical issue and the idea of quality extends beyond the voice call or data connection to include the speed with which orders are filled, the specific knowledge about the customer a CSR has, and the amount of self-service control and service personalization extended to the customer.

Customer Experience and Control Throughout

No matter the relative sophistication of the services in question, cable operators can gain critical competitive advantages by focusing on a high quality customer experience and an increasing level of customer control over services. Customer self-service will move from generic customer service portals to customized, branded customer interfaces. Early portals, some of which are already in service, will incorporate basic information and account management tools to assist customers in managing their service portfolios and billing, utilize online help and in some cases place orders for additional services.

As the service technologies become more intelligent, and the supporting back office fully automated, customer self-service portals will become extremely functional and will serve both administrative and end-user functions. An administrator's portal will allow a manager to handle all aspects of account management, such as submitting orders and following their status, setting permissions to determine which users have access to certain service sets and establishing tiered security policies. They will support everything from checking SLA compliance to fully automated service ordering, online trouble ticket submission and management or modification of any and all service features. So, for example, an administrator might use the portal to add more business lines, increase managed bandwidth or adjust guaranteed QoS based on the time of day.

End-user portals will allow individuals to manage their own services, depending on their permissions, by selecting or unsubscribing to defined feature sets. For example, a user might add unified messaging or find-me-follow-me services to their voice features. Through the portal they may also adjust call routing policies, set a single-ring number, and set up standard functions like out-of-office messages for all of their email and voice mail accounts.

These same types of controls – administrative and end user - can and should be enabled for CSRs in the call center, before or in tandem with roll-outs to customer portals. The basic point is that if a business customer dials into a call center, whoever answers the call better understand who the customer is, what their service portfolio looks like, what additional services the network could deliver to them and what's affected by and being done to fix any network problems. Any changes to the service portfolio should be made at the click of a mouse and enabled in as close to real time as possible. This level of detailed information and automated functionality is ultimately dependent, however, on the strength and end-to-end automation of the operations support systems (OSS) managing background processes and a combination of network technologies.

An Incremental Approach

Naturally, not all of the OSS functionality discussed will be necessary from day one, so any solution should be deployable in increments that grow in parallel with service complexity. Relying on a quick and dirty solution, however, that is not already designed for the future network state will simply lead the operator into a difficult cycle where operations is constantly trying to catch up with the network, but always seems to fall further behind. Such is the nature of most ILEC operations, so here sits an opportunity to gain competitive advantage by planning for the future service and OSS capability set from the start.

Working with an Experienced OSS Partner

There are a number of vendors that offer integrated OSS functionality in MSOs production environments. To minimize the risks associated with a long term undertaking such as an incremental OSS build out, it is critical to speak with each vendor's customers to gain a solid understanding about the vendor's strengths and breadth of expertise.

Participation on the part of the MSO is also necessary to ensure success. The MSOs expertise and familiarity with its own operations must be captured and channeled into business and operational planning for product and service definition. The MSO must also participate in defining processes for order capture, order management, equipment procurement and installation, service provisioning, and service diagnostics. It is imperative that IS/IT, engineering, customer care and operations work together with the OSS partner to define these requirements as well as defining and deploying services jointly once the OSS environment is established.

If these groups operate with solid walls between them, or with distinct operations systems, the operator will unnecessarily delay every service roll out, add arbitrary costs to the equation and significantly increase the risk of either failing to deliver a new service or failing to beat competitors to market. Building an integrated OSS suite correctly from the start, with a clear road map of how it will grow in increments, will deliver advantages that competitors cannot match. Most competitors – including ILECs and CLECs - are themselves struggling to coordinate disparate systems and organizations that were neither designed nor tasked to play well together. All that is required is for the operator to remain in a forward-thinking mode, understand the specific needs of the IP services market, and recognize the relationship between the investment of time and effort in creating OSS automation and the distinct competitive advantages that will result.

Sidebar

Key Capabilities of a Commercial OSS Platform

- Common information model to maintain service profiles for all subscribers
- Ability to support complex account and subscriber hierarchies
- Service creation and modification tools to enable rapid service personalization
- Pre-built service definitions for common services
- Auto-discovery of network, services and customer premises devices
- Detailed views of service topology using pre-built definitions and relationship models to support provisioning and network maintenance
- Service availability checks based on network topology
- Pre-built workflow management processes for order fulfillment and service activatio
- Self-care processes and enablers
- Open APIs for order capture from other sales, care and billing systems
- Integration framework to support service definition and integration with third-party content and service providers