Pipeline

Knowledge Is Power

Billing World: Version 2.0

by Barbara Lancaster

A few weeks ago, the latest iteration of Billing & OSS World hit Chicago's McCormick Place. As this was the first event since the show and its parent publication were acquired by Virgo Publishing, we were eager to see how the new ownership would affect the overall substance of the show. What follows is a recap of the event from the perspective of LTC, International analyst and Pipeline Contributing Editor, Barbara Lancaster. She took in a great deal of the conference programming. Following her piece will be a few notes of Tim's on the exhibition component of the event. Enjoy!

Business Drivers first; OSS/BSS second. Yes – Really! So say the presenters and panelists of Billing and OSS World 2008

By Barbara Lancaster

In a show dedicated to software applications, it was music to a die hard business analyst's ears to hear pretty much every panelist and every speaker talk about the importance of getting the business strategies straight first and then building systems to support that vision.

From the opening plenary session of the new Billing & OSS World (the first under the banner of Virgo Publishing) getting the business drivers straight was the tone for the conference. Two service provider and three vendor representatives talked about what it takes to really transform service providers, successfully. We heard:

- Leonard Sheahan of Oracle say that it must be "Culture, process, organization, *then* the systems".

- Phillipe Alvarez of RCN heartily agreed: "look at process first, then systems." He acknowledged that it is very tempting to go for the systems first – it seems logical and touchable, but just don't do it!

- Scott Jenkins of Sprint suggested that you find some low-hanging fruit to build momentum and use that success to work on changing the mindset of

the organization.

- Tech Mahindra's Dhananjay Pavgi observed that changes in the OSS/BSS environment are being driven by the changes in the network – and the services that the new network capabilities enable.

- IBM's Bob Hoochi warned that "organization (change) is the most difficult" and suggested that common measures and metrics can be very helpful in getting disparate warring factions to work together.

Translating business priorities into actionable OSS/BSS programs and integration architectures is of course very, very difficult. In my opinion, it is because it requires two groups of experts to figure out how to communicate effectively. Business 'speak' and Systems 'speak' are truly two different languages based on two different perspectives and two very different sets of experience. The participants at Billing & OSS World 2008 were intent on finding bridges across this Grand Canyon. Fantastic!

Or maybe we can just buy something…

With business, business, business, as the backdrop, the sessions of course did still manage to address tools, systems and implementation options. Dan Baker of Dittberner Associates guided a discussion on Breaking the Billing Bottleneck, with three vendors discussing one of the current hot topics: whether or not a Product Catalog is the next magical solution. Amdocs, Netcracker and MetraTech weighed in on some of the issues involved in getting new products and services launched efficiently and the role of a Product Catalog in helping ease some of the problems.

- Ricky Boyle of Netcracker, pointed out that having a single repository of product information that could present different "faces" or subsets of information to meet the needs of each group was an important concept. Having recently made the move from service provider to vendor, he suggested that it was a fundamental change to be able to expose services to customers, and to content partners, and to the network, as well as the usual internal consumers of product details.

- Alon Meller who is leading the Amdocs Product Catalog initiative outlined the process of capturing the information and relationships that should be stored in the Product Catalog. Customer, Service, Pricing, Billing, and Network for example might currently have information scattered in 20 or 30 "catalogs", that are part of various OSS/BSS applications, which are likely running on a variety of different computing platforms too. He described the process of bringing the information together as expensive and time consuming (not want anyone wanted to hear, but he is right that this type of consolidation is a major effort).

- Doug Zone, CTO of MetraTech made the point that tackling the need for coherent information about products must be part of an overall decision about architecture. He also cautioned that very few companies actually know what's in many of their applications and how the data is used within, and between applications. Rather than choosing yet another tool, and beginning a major consolidation effort, he cautioned that it important to first really know the business Processes around Products.

This session provided some lively debate about whether or not a centralized repository for Product information would result in streamlined product lifecycle management and improved profit margins. What was clear once again is that however you choose to store your product details, you had better first understand the process of getting that product profitably to market.

It is all about the Customer

This conference featured a number of panel discussions which enabled the audience to hear many different perspectives in a very efficient format. The service provider panel on Customer Experience was a great example of that. We heard from Laurinda Pang of Global Crossing (whose newly created position, VP of Customer Experience Engineering, makes it clear how much emphasis is being placed on getting this right), Skip Kline, the Provisioning Architecture Analyst at Cox Communications and Ashvin Vellody, Director, Enterprise Architecture at U.S. Cellular. Here are some of the highlights of their discussion:

- Ashvin noted that U.S. Cellular has been focused on providing the best possible customer experience for several years, and is using a Southwest Airlines-style approach of empowering every employee to do the right thing. As a result, it has managed to bring churn down below 1.5% per year. He made clear that even though he leads IT, it is not about tools; it's about what happens with every customer touch-point.

- Laurinda echoed this sentiment and went further, pointing out that it is not enough to get a great customer satisfaction score (Global Crossing is currently achieving a 98% score), it is about creating customer loyalty. To figure out what it takes to earn that loyalty means talking with customers – a lot. Once you've been able to determine exactly what is important to them, who is doing that well and who isn't, you then have an opportunity to seize. Delight them by addressing that high value item and you'll earn that loyalty.

- Skip Kline noted that at Cox their challenges are about the new products and services in their non-core business (i.e. telephony). Cox has a good understanding of the services their video customers value and are working to ensure that the same level of customer experience is available for telephony and broadband as well.

The Exhibition Hall

A more compact space than in the boom years, but quite well attended nevertheless. Thanks to the Virgo folks for thinking about how customers use the exhibition space too. Having chairs and tables scattered around meant that you didn't need to leave the hall in order to rest your feet, make a call or type up some notes. A nice touch.

The vendors I spoke with reported a reasonable number of service provider shoppers, and several quite interested in actually making a purchasing decision this year.

A relative new comer that caught my attention was ECtel, offering an Integrated Revenue Management system that combines fraud management, revenue assurance and revenue management. It can be implemented module by module, quickly and at low cost. They've posted a couple of big wins in a short period of time, most notably AT&T. Their easy to use, "all in one" dashboard provides quick and accurate views on all important metrics, and drill down is simple: just click on the graph and dig down as deeply as required, right down to the specific CDR if necessary.

The Bottom Line

While overall attendance is down again year over year, this show clearly still is of interest to the community that really counts: service providers. The show venue was good, but the agenda suffered from the all-too-typical conference problem. Too much "talking at" and not enough "conferring". With only ten minutes between sessions and no lunch room, delegates had to choose between attending sessions and continuing their conversations. When this show moves to Las Vegas next year, let's hope that they add some more time for networking and dialog, too. I'll be there to see how it goes!

A few thoughts on the expo...

By Tim Young

While we're very pleased with Barbara's reaction to the conference programming, we thought we'd add a few notes on the expo portion, in which Barbara was unable to spend much time, but the rest of the Pipeline team took in fully.

We asked every company with whom we met to describe their reaction to the show, and the comments on the show floor were almost universally disappointed. It seems that many of the service provider reps who took in the conference programming and probably attended preplanned meetings probably didn't spend much time on the floor. If they did, they certainly weren't engaging the booth

personnel, generally speaking.

There is always a space in the industry for a conference. An opportunity to get together and exchange ideas is valuable. That portion clearly went well.   However, a trade show with a full expo floor may not be necessary if booths are seldom visited. This may have been an off year, and we fully understand that Virgo just acquired the show and probably didn't have time to make any major changes in the show or drum up a brand new attendee base. Still, the feedback we encountered really couldn't go unreported.

One drawback may have been scheduling. The show came a mere 2-3 weeks before the TMForum's Management World and NCTA's The Cable Show. Many exhibitors we talked to were saving press releases for those larger shows. I would assume that at least a few potential attendees may have opted out of B/OSS, as well. An earlier date for next year's event (April 14-16), as well as the show's move to Las Vegas will hopefully bode well for attendance

In the future, we hope that Virgo will take Billing and OSS World back to a place of tremendous value in the space. It could serve as a fantastic conference or, with a little work, a revitalized expo. As it stood this year, though, the expo side of the event was rather quiet. We wish Virgo the best in improving the event, which has been important in the space, and anticipate next year's show.

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