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Is Bigger Better? NXTcomm 2008
by Tim Young

This month, Pipeline headed to the Strip for the annual collaboration between the TIA and USTA: NXTcomm 2008. Las Vegas represented a new venue for NXTcomm, which was in Chicago last year, and will return to Chicago in 2009.

In contrast to the last few shows in Chicago (whether as NXTcomm or GLOBALCOMM, but especially compared to the Supercomm days), this show felt a little quiet. The reduced din may have been partly caused by the show floor setup, which had exhibitors on two floors (and only three escalators connecting the two). This broke up the expo and, inadvertently, diminished some of the intangible buzz of the show floor.

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Furthermore, in a discussion with one vendor, we arrived at the theory that the problem with exciting, alluring show venues like Las Vegas can be that registration numbers may improve, but there's no way to make sure that the attendees spend their time at the show rather than at Cirque du Soleil. Random chatter I heard in and around the show often centered on Vegas entertainment rather than the industry at hand. (One of my personal favorites, overheard on the NXTcomm shuttle: "Did you go see Carrot Top? He's hilarious." It's good to see that he still has a few fans.)

Still, the show represented one-stop shopping for major telecom vendors active in the North American market, and is still one of the biggest shows in the telecommunications world. As a publication dedicated to the OSS space, however, we are perennially compelled to report that shows like NXTcomm are tough for smaller vendors. The big guys (Microsoft, Sun, Fujitsu, et. al.) have massive budgets and enormous booths. What's an OSS vendor in a 10x10 to do?

NXTcomm attempted to address this issue with the OSS/BSS Pavilion at this year's show. The pavilion, we're sorry to report, had only four companies involved: Aricent, Sonus, Amartus, and OmniOSS. Still, the show is on the right track by at least designating an area for these companies. I hope they continue to look for ways to represent industry subsets and drive traffic to these vendors in years to come.

One of the main issues I heard being dealt with at this event, and at other recent events, is the role of the service provider. At this event, we were still hearing some of the "we refuse to become dumb pipes" rhetoric, but saw tons of offerings from companies that make alternate monetization possible in order to allow service providers to create new and interesting revenue streams and maintain viability, even as their role in the space changes.

Furthermore, the idea of quality as a key differentiator is being hammered home more than ever. What else can service providers compete on? Offerings are getting more similar every day. No one wants to compete on price. Quality *is* key. If you don't believe it, check out any Verizon ad. From wireless to FiOS, they've embraced this messaging of quality above all, and they're not alone.

The Expo:

As usual, we wanted to take some time to highlight some companies we visited on the expo floor, and let you know a little about where they've been and where they're going.

Soapstone Networks:

Avici Networks was active in the core router business for years, and was successful, if perhaps a bit too reliant on AT&T as a core customer. Last year, it launched its Soapstone Networks business unit, leveraging Avici's core router competency, but developing software that creates an abstraction layer between the services and the infrastructure. Earlier this year, they announced that all of Avici was moving under the Soapstone umbrella, and that the entire company was focusing on developing, promoting, and selling this software.

At NXTcomm, Soapstone was on the scene and fully branded as such. They were promoting their PNC (Provider Network Controller) solution in a multi-vendor Carrier Ethernet demonstration. The demo included Amdocs Cramer OSS, which was essentially deconstructing a service into components, establishing quality criteria for those resources, and conveying a description to the PNC. The whole process employed TMForum standards and was NGOSS compliant.

Soapstone Networks is definitely a company to watch in the future. With capital on hand from its Avici days, and the vision and courage to reinvent itself as a brand new type of company, it may have a bright future.

Tekelec:

The company, whose sweet spot is multimedia session control and network intelligence, was promoting its partnership with Verisign to deliver a solution for provisioning routing data across multiple service providers. Peered service networks are certainly a strong path toward enhanced voice and video, and peering requires interoperability between two points in the network. According to Tekelec: "authoritative third-party peer-registry services, such as the VeriSign Network Routing Directory, and third-party ENUM address resolution platforms such as Tekelec's TekPath Route Director."

Tekelec also has good things to say about the future of SMS, including sponsored SMS services. The sponsored SMS is just another example of the alternative monetization that is necessary for service providers to continue to be viable as their role in the space changes.

Anda/Nakina:

Anda was present at the show along with Nakina, as they promoted their partnership to jointly develop and market Nakina's carrier-grade, multi-vendor, multi-technology network management solution for managing ANDA Networks' EtherTone® Ethernet access product portfolio. The two had been working together in other capacities for some time now, but this particular partnership represents a neat development in their apparently mutually beneficial relationship. The partnership also allows Nakina to maintain its multi-vendor approach, which Anda will actively encourage.

Atvent

Atvent Solutions was at the event promoting the newest version of its MobileNet solution. The OSS package hosts tailored application bundles and is armed with the ability to allow technicians to wirelessly access real time information in order to pro-

vide preventive maintenance, quality assurance, and rapid service calls. The solution is also useful for construction, including network extension or rebuilds. Atvent is also interesting, because it's been dabbling in SaaS since the phrase was hardly the buzzword it is today. According to Louis Poulin, Atvent's CEO and Managing Director, the show was strong for Atvent. While Poulin admits that any company would always love even more traffic and visibility than it receives, Atvent was pleased with NXTcomm and hopes that it can regain the level of attendance that it enjoyed in its Supercomm days.

Actelis:

They're doing interesting things in promoting carrier ethernet over copper. While Eric Vallone, Actelis's VP of Marketing, insists that fiber is still preferable if you can get it, the company is promoting some solutions for getting some blazing speeds out of copper that can serve as either a stopgap while fiber rollouts continue to plod on, or as a replacement for fiber in areas in which costly fiber rollouts simply don't make sense.

OmniOSS:

After being founded a few years ago, and after a few initial sales, OmniOSS has taken a few years to develop solutions and manage growth. They were at NXTcomm as a sort of soft re-launch that's a prelude to a full market blast later in the calendar year. We'll be looking out for them.

Allot:

In the beginning of this article, I was talking about alternate revenue streams attracting service providers whose role in the space is changing. The key to understanding and embracing this change, according to Allot, is traffic inspection and classification. Using its DPI background, Allot offers products that enable SPs, theoretically, to identify and prioritize traffic. In addition, they want to offer the SPs the ability to offer premium services to specialized customers. Got a customer who is an intense online gamer? Perhaps they'd pay an extra $2.99 a month for a guaranteed level of bandwidth for online play during peak hours. Allot claims they can enable just such an approach.

Sonus

In addition to its big, sleek booth on the general show floor, Sonus operated a small booth in the OSS/BSS Pavilion that, when I dropped by, was manned by former Atreus Systems personnel. Since Sonus's acquisition of Atreus was only a few months ago, I'd imagine the paperwork on the smaller booth was probably already done before the buy was announced. At any rate, we were glad to see Sonus active in the smaller space, as well as among the ranks of booth behemoths.

Some returning exhibitors that we met with, such as Agilent, Polystar, Narus, Aricent, NetQuest, and Amartus, were using the show's stage for major

announcements, but their attendance at the event was of key importance in order to promote their visibility in the communications market.

Wrapping up

NXTcomm returns to Chicago next year. We're curious to take a look at final attendance numbers from this show in Vegas and contrast them with those from Chicago. I'm sure the NXTcomm staff is crunching those numbers as we speak to determine the best location for NXTcomm in 2010 and beyond. As shows like MWC in Barcelona and the Cable Show (NCTA) continue to grow in size and scope, a historic telco show like NXTcomm must continue to grow and change with the industry. We'll stay tuned.

If you have news you'd like to share with Pipeline, contact us at editor@pipelinepub.com.