

Meeting Service Quality Assurance Head-On

by John Hansen, CEO, Vallent Corporation

Many service providers are now starting to think innovatively about how to meet the requirements of users from businesses of all types, large and small.

Irrespective of whether it's fixed or mobile services, business customers have often had to take second place to the consumer market when it came to getting specially targeted offerings from their communications service providers. Sure, the larger national and international companies usually enjoyed dedicated account and support staff and specialist services like Virtual Private Networks, but the experience of many small to medium sized business users has usually been limited to standard service packages.

On the fixed side, incumbent operators were often forced by regulatory conditions to limit the service options of their business customers for fear that their already tight profits would be eroded still further. When services were specifically bundled together to target the SME space, the market's general lack of exposure about the benefits of advanced communications limited real innovation. Instead, many service providers were forced to apply the usual 'one size fits all' marketing model of traditional telecommunications to what in reality was a very diverse sector.

Historically, similar issues applied to the mobile sector, but were accentuated by the intense focus of mobile operators on the consumer market, with a particular emphasis on the teenage and early adopter segment. Business users may account for a significant proportion of service providers' revenue, but sadly they haven't been seen as 'sexy' or as challenging as the much more content laden, 'creative' end of the consumer market. To compound this, purchasing decisions on mobile communications within smaller companies were often seen as the responsibility of the generic office manager and the sell was on simple cost and coverage issues, rather than the more strategic commercial benefits that a well-structured portfolio of mobile services could provide.

Businesses sell quality:

Fortunately these perceptions are changing, with many service providers in both spaces now starting to think innovatively about how to meet the real demands of users from businesses of all types, large and small. As they evaluate these needs, they're picking up on one prime concern of any business customer – service quality, in its widest possible sense.

The rewards are certainly there for the taking. Enterprise customers usually deliver far higher ARPU returns and, once established, are far more unlikely to churn in search of the lowest possible tariff, like many consumer customers. They also hold the promise of acting as drivers for further service sales to staff and employees, particularly given the trend towards teleworking and of providing mobile phones, partitioned between private and business usage through different billing and account processes.

The expansion of broadband services only increases the attractiveness – and potential returns – of the enterprise market. With the infrastructure needed to deliver seamless voice and data communications across cellular, wireless LAN and fixed DSL links now falling into place,

converged fixed-mobile service strategies are the obvious next step for ambitious service providers to take. Joined-up thinking is finally coming, especially in the mobile space, with business applications from simple e-mail up to ERP systems and converged voicemail now capable of being accessed reliably and securely from mobile handsets and laptops.

Indeed, discussion has already started in the industry about enterprise services being the natural next step for Mobile Virtual Network Operators (MVNO) to target, bundling fixed and mobile connectivity together with application and content resources, and aiming these at specific vertical markets like distribution, travel and the like.



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So – a broad, sunlit upland of limitless opportunity for service providers of all types – or are there still problems lurking in the wings?

The truth is that while the rewards of serving business users may be greater, so too are the risks – hence the need for an equal – or even greater – focus on delivering service quality to customers, compared with that in the consumer space. Sales and marketing presentations may speak of 'mission critical' applications, but the sharp truth is that for the SME customer the reality is more like 'mortgage critical'. When an SME's own customer relationships are impacted by poor communications, their financial and reputational hit becomes truly personal and they are highly unlikely to stay with a service provider who exposes them to that level of damage.

As a result, the temptation to leap into a program of service and business development expansion, aimed at generating more business from the enterprise customer, must be tempered with the appreciation that the quality concerns of a potentially hyper-critical audience must be met effectively. That requires a reexamination of the tools, processes and systems that will be used to ensure that services are delivered to customers – across increasingly diverse communications paths – at levels of quality, availability and reliability appropriate to the service level agreements in place or the tariffs on offer.

This is where the problems can start to arise....

Developing a holistic approach:

Traditional approaches to service quality management were based around mainly passive and almost totally network-centric concepts. Basic sets of data on network and service performance would be gathered from probes in the infrastructure and supporting systems, and then analyzed by skilled engineering and operations staff – where time and budgets permitted – to spot anomalies or problematic conditions. All too often, these staff only became aware of significant problems when trouble tickets started pouring out of the call center as agents tried to mollify frustrated customers. By then, however, the damage to a service provider's brand image is already done.

Alternatively, services would be created, marketed and launched to the world, with up-front significant investments in development and advertising, only for the network itself to fail to perform to expectations when suddenly put under the increased demand of a new service or

application. Once again, reputation is impacted and customers are put off experimenting with new services in the future.

Both of these issues also highlight one of the central problems with historic service assurance or performance management strategies. Information important to the well-being of the company as a commercial whole often remained trapped in departmental or technology silos. It was far often simpler to shift blame, rather than collectively problem-solve across different boundaries and share insights, irrespective of whether the input came from billing, financial planning, business development, engineering, operations or CRM.

While the industry is now well advanced in addressing these issues, first by accepting that these problems exist and then by developing suitable tools and systems to address them, the next generation network environment – especially in its business services incarnation – is set to increase the pressure by a few more notches.



Delivering quality:

It's rare for a customer's perception of service quality to be based on just one or two simple binary opposites – such as the phone works or it doesn't. Instead, our 'gut' feelings of quality are actually based on numerous small, incremental and largely unconscious perceptions, which, in traditional telecommunications could range from a grubby and bad-tempered engineer turning up on the doorstep to a minor, but recurring fault on a handset. In this rapidly receding world of fairly simple, basic voice and data connectivity services, there were only a limited number of things that could go wrong.... and the future's looking far different. Consider a typical scenario where triple or quad-play operator starts to target the SME market. In their fixed line infrastructure, they have their DSL network to support – one which, in many cases, will be coexisting with the infrastructures of incumbents or other service providers.. They may also be using DSL connections as backhaul out to WiFi hotspots, or have peering arrangements with other hotspot owners to provide nomadic wireless access to their business customers.

In the cellular space, they may have their own radio infrastructure to support, or, alternatively, may have partnered with an existing cellular operator to buy capacity and act as an MVNO. Additionally, it is also likely that they have their own range of handsets and mobile devices, each of which adds yet another variable to the consistency element of overall service quality.

Finally, they're also going to have to deal with far more complexity in the back office areas of BSS and OSS, especially where content and applications may be being sourced from a third party, or link straight in the business customer's own IT systems. Underpinning all these applications is a continuing requirement for service assurance systems to work seamlessly across both IP and circuit-switched technologies, mirroring the interworking of the communications traffic itself. While any chain is only as strong as its weakest link, history and experience show us that it's usually easiest to blame the communications service provider.

In response, service providers need to be able to balance the operational benefits of having a common platform, gathering and integrating service data from many different sources, with the flexibility and cost-efficiency of a modular approach to provide support and specific services as and when required.

Such a platform must possess particular characteristics. It must be equipped with the appropriate network and system interfaces to cope with today's multi-vendor environment, have the ability to display job-function specific service quality information to appropriate management dashboards and systems. Additionally, it needs to be supported by a methodology powerful enough to help marketing, business development and engineering staff to mode and define Key Performance Indicators (KPIs), Key Quality Indicators (KQIs) and commercial Service Level Agreements (SLAs).

Supporting this, the service provider also requires prepackaged modules capable of supporting particular services in the shortest timeframes if time to market is to be minimized. Examples of these service and application-specific packages should certainly include support for BlackBerry, i-mode, VoIP, and enterprise-grade GPRS, for a start.

If business customers are to truly benefit from all the new services and applications that are now coming, they must be persuaded that their service providers have the tools and techniques in place to support them on their journeys towards greater competitiveness and efficiency. Without the correct emphasis on service quality assurance, then all the marketing and advertising in the world won't change a business customer's perception that is based on real experience.

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