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Policy Control Moves to the Heart of the Customer Experience

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Policy control has started to evolve from an enforcement solution to find its way into the center of the customer experience. Mobile operators have spotted the potential for policy control to improve the customer experience in an automated, yet intelligent way. The potential was always there, as policy control has infinite possibilities to make anything happen on the network, based on virtually any event or stimulus.

Giving individual attention is difficult to attain in a mass-market business. But that's exactly what a service provider needs to avoid disappointment and churn from their customer base. Customers don't want to feel that they are being treated just as a number, they want to feel recognized and listened to; they want to feel that their service provider values their preferences. However the tools to ensure a personalized service at a mass-market level have not been in place until relatively recently.

Policy control is a relative newcomer as a service provider technology, but has made major in-roads since its introduction. For mobile operators in particular, the phenomenon of the mobile data overload, courtesy of data-intensive smartphones and mobile broadband offerings, has led to interest in the enforcement options that policy control provides.



In particular, bandwidth-capping and fair-usage enforcement has captured the imagination of service providers desperate to ensure that the activities of a minority of extremely high bandwidth users do not ruin the experience of the majority. Similarly, the ability of policy control solutions to address network congestion during peak hours by strictly enforcing policies or prioritizing high-value customers' data traffic, has caught the interest of service providers. Nonetheless, these applications of policy control have been accompanied by suspicion and controversy.

However policy control does not have to be just an enforcement solution. A number of service providers have already started to use policy control in a more positive, proactive way to improve the overall customer experience. A good example of this comes from Belgian MSO Telenet. Telenet, like every other broadband Internet service provider was concerned about excessive data usage from some customers but still wanted to improve their customers' experience across the board. They believed that more openness with their customers about data usage would improve the relationship with their subscribers.

Using online charging and policy control Telenet created an online interface for customers to view their data usage patterns and control every aspect of their account. With this self-service portal as the hub, Telenet allowed customers to choose what to do once the quota stipulated by their flat-fee service was exceeded. Subscribers have the choice of going onto a pay-as-you-go plan for the duration of the month, purchasing additional MB packages or getting free dial-up speed for the rest of the month.



The combination of being rigid about keeping within the monthly data limits while being flexible about what to do if their data limit was reached was a powerful combination which took away the confusion about data usage that subscribers feel with other service providers. As proof of the impact of their self-service portal's success, Telenet experienced a dramatic drop in customer service calls, as customers felt that everything they needed was already in their own hands. Customer service calls related to the service dropped 40% following the introduction of the self-service portal.

Because Telenet allowed their customers to see their data usage across the month on a day-by-day basis, their customers developed a rare understanding of how their internet behavior impacted their bandwidth usage. This meant that unlike most subscribers of most service providers who feel that data usage limits are confusing at best or unfair at worst, Telenet subscribers understand exactly what they are getting for their money. When customers reach their quota, many users opt to move to a "payment by MB" plan, which results in higher revenues for Telenet.

It is case studies like these that show the potential that policy control has to improve the customer experience, but this is just the tip of the iceberg. Because policy control can make anything happen on the network, based on virtually any event or stimulus, the potential for policy control to improve the customer experience is virtually limitless. In fact the only thing that is holding back the industry is imagination.

What consumers want out of their customer experience is the equivalent of the old-fashioned local shop, where they go in and they're greeted warmly by the shop-owner, they know exactly where things are and they are treated like the individual that they are. The old-fashioned shop-owner knows how to strike the right balance of giving personalized service without overstepping their boundaries. No-one wants to feel spied on, but everyone wants to be understood. So when the shop-owner says "Hello Mrs. Brown, how are you today? I've kept aside a loaf of rye-bread before we ran out, because I know you like that on the weekend. We've also got some more strawberries in today - I know you were disappointed we ran out yesterday", he has taken what he sees about a customer's behavior and turned that into a positive interaction. And as a bonus, he has up-sold that customer based on her individual tastes.

Taking that ideal customer experience and transposing it onto a mass-market service provider is entirely feasible. Every customer has a wealth of unmet needs. Finding out what those needs are is not as difficult as you may think. Every customer leaves a trail of clues as to what they want and what else they might buy from you, on the network itself.

The trick is to automate and personalize the responses to these different clues. Your customer downloads X1; why not offer them X2 at a discount? Your customer keeps phoning Y country, so why not offer to upgrade them to an international calling plan? Your customers are overwhelmingly using YouTube and Facebook websites, so why not pro-actively speed up access to these websites?

This is just the beginning of a very exciting trend for policy control to throw off the mantle of enforcer and to become the focal point for positive customer interactions. As an industry, it may take us a little time to generate the equivalent of the old-fashioned shop-owner level of service. But finally the tools are here to do that, and a positive, individualized service is attainable for every customer.