

Improving the Customer Experience: Profiting From Back-office Support

By Stuart Cochran

Over the last year, the US wireless industry has taken the leap to 3G services as the competitive situation has accelerated the deployment of high-speed data services. The major players have rolled out 3G and are introducing elements of an IP Multimedia Subsystem (IMS) architecture that will enable them to rapidly develop and launch a broad range of new personalized voice, video, data, and multimedia services.

Unfortunately, many consumers still feel that the wireless industry has completely failed to explain what the new technology can do for them. Some recommendations for how service providers can realize the potential of 3G technologies to enable better, more compelling applications and content, are:

Usability comes before usage

With services and devices becoming more and more complex, the correct retail approach at point of sale also becomes increasingly important. How many customers generate below average revenues because they simply don't understand how to use the services? And how affordable is it for operators to keep re-training retail staff to set-up and demonstrate new services?

First impressions count

Many operators make welcome calls to the new customers that join them. This first impression is very memorable to the customer and, done right, can improve loyalty, as well as providing the first opportunity to gather important feedback and sell new services. Are customer service agents equipped to simply and rapidly provide new services, explain charges or diagnose problems?

Complaints can turn into recommendations

It may sound counter-intuitive, but research has shown that customers who complain, and are dealt with quickly and fairly, are more loyal than those who never complain. Are customer service agents able to determine billing or service provision errors, track progress, and resolve issues? Are they measured to spend the time dealing with complaints properly or simply motivated to deal with as many calls as possible – even if this means offering no resistance to a customer about to leave them?

A service that half works, doesn't work at all

As services become more complex, it is increasingly apparent to the end user that all links in the end-to-end chain need to be working – from content provider through content portal to device, or from corporate application through a gateway to many different data networks (Wi-Fi, GPRS, HSDPA, or 3G). How much customer dissatisfaction and lost revenue is caused by the inability of customer service agents to provision and trouble-shoot services end-to-end?

Pipeline

Knowledge is Power.

The migration to 3G brings benefits – greater voice capacity and a platform for wireless multimedia services – as well as challenges due to the increased complexity of the services. The examples above show the impact on customer service performance if the new services are poorly explained and delivered. So, how can operators reliably provide 3G services to overcome these barriers?

The first step is to shorten the time taken to fulfill orders so that customers, no matter what retail channel they are using, can be provided with service almost instantaneously. This is clearly important when customers are holding on the phone, but should also be extended to the point of sale, as it then allows retail staff to provide and demonstrate new services – just when the customer needs the most help and is very receptive to new ideas. It is vital that the service fulfillment systems have open interfaces that enable customer care and engineering staff to query, track and intervene in the order processing, so that customer inquiries can be dealt with quickly.

The second step is to create a unified process that manages the end-to-end network equipment, databases, and content platforms involved in service delivery. Often, a fragmented process is the result of back office systems sitting in silos that are not integrated. This leads to extended order processing times, inconsistencies, partially completed orders, and complex problem diagnosis and resolution – all adversely affecting customer satisfaction. Operators who intend to offer bundles of voice, data, and content need back office systems that can manage all network domains, from existing 2G voice and data through to IP multimedia platforms.

Finally, the benefit of harmonizing tariffs, customer service, and service delivery nationally and internationally is that customers are encouraged to roam onto subsidiary or affiliate networks, and are motivated to make more use of their services. The challenge for the operators is to implement the back office systems that can cost-effectively integrate to a wide variety of systems, enabling them to standardize product catalogs while still allowing local actions in response to competition.

Operators that successfully re-engineer their back office systems to achieve these improvements will enhance the customer service experience. Combined with the improving perception of 3G handsets and services, it will be an important step in making 3G desirable to all wireless users – and not a potentially misunderstood niche.