Pipeline
Your OSS/BSS Information Source.
www.pipelinepub.com Volume 8, Issue 6

Is TV Everywhere Going Anywhere?

By Tim Young

I got a call today. It was from your couch. It misses you.

You guys used to be old pals; you and your couch. You'd placed it in a position of honor in your house, directly in front of your other close friend: Mr. Television.

The three of you, together, had perfected the viewing experience. You had the video and sound polished to the point that rivaled the theater, but the snacks were cheaper and, thanks to couch, the seat was way more comfortable.

Those were good times.

Things are different now. You've traded in the 52 inches of high-definition glory that Mr. Television provided for the portability of an iPad. The sound, once rich with earth-shaking bass projected for the neighborhood to hear, is now delivered with only the gusto your ear buds can manage.

And goodness knows where you're sitting…

You're one of a still relatively small, but growing, number of folks who are embracing the promise of TV Everywhere.

The capital T, capital V, capital E program, known as TV Everywhere, began as an idea from Comcast and Time Warner to retain customers as more and more consumers were opting for a better mobile experience than they had previously been offered by their cable providers. By allowing subscribers to access content via desktop and mobile apps after undergoing an often-rigorous authentication process, cablecos can provide an amped-up version of Hulu, giving customers more of the shows they want when they want them.

Since then, a wide variety of other pay-TV operators have followed suit, and the popularity of apps, like HBO GO, demonstrates a demand in the market that was not always obvious.

However, to date, TV Everywhere has not quite lived up to its promise. That's why Turner Broadcasting has just started blitzing the airwaves with commercials intended to educate cable subscribers on the promise of TV Everywhere, from how to get started with the service to the sorts of programs that are available online.

They've even enlisted Conan O'Brien to help spread the word.

The benefits of additional TV Everywhere use are clear for content providers. Ratings matter, and as more and more users opt out of appointment-based viewing of even popular programs, content producers are eager to find ways to keep their ratings on pace with their actual viewership.

The Turner programming contains the same ads online as it does during its regular run, and Nielsen includes those views in their ratings, provided the shows are watched within a few days of the regular air date.

"If they watch 'The Closer' on Wednesday on their iPad, we get as much credit as if they watched at 9:06 on Monday night." Steve Koonin, President of Turner Entertainment Networks told the New York Times. Service providers, meanwhile, get to tap into the Hulu zeitgeist, meeting customers where they are in terms of demand and potentially expanding their reach to include customers on the go.

Naturally, however, critics of the initiative abound.

After undergoing an often-rigorous authentication process, cablecos can provide an amped-up version of Hulu.

Ryan Lawler of GigaOM asserts that attempting to attract the free-or-low-cost online video consumer set into a subscriber-only scenario ignores the fact that many of those viewers are people who have no intention of paying $100 a month for cable. Sure, the prospect of watching a show on an iPad is nice, but it's not $100-a-month nice.

Others, like Mark Glaser, insist that TV Everywhere is an attempt to cling to a dying business model (traditional cable) by linking it to a new business model, while making no changes to the underlying structures. Customers still can't pick and choose their favorite channels or programs. They still can't receive an online-only subscription.

Some of these complaints can be cast off as nay saying from those who want it all and don't want to pay for it. However, there are plenty of very real considerations that service providers must weigh. How do they make the customer experience more seamless across devices, confront the threat of OTT video, and approach service quality issues in this new environment?

Like so many other communications stories, the TV Everywhere story is, in many ways, the story of the support systems that reside beneath its glossy exterior. Both the successes and shortcomings of TV Everywhere are often the result of both failures and successes of providers in putting the right OSS and BSS tools in place.

In a blog post from around this time last year, Monolith Software's Jeff Parker points out that many of the complaints and concerns about TV Everywhere really boil down to SLA management issues. Content handled through web and app channels is handled separately from content handled via traditional distribution methods. An IT architecture riddled with disjointed siloes is an unwieldy beast made more unwieldy with the addition of another screen. Theoretically, a unified SLA management architecture can help provide a better-aligned and more customizable set of offerings.

Policy control is another high priority for TV Everywhere to work as an extension of, rather than a replacement for, the traditional cable experience. Whether or not pay-TV providers ought to make an online-only package available (or will be forced to do so by user demand and market realities), the current TV Everywhere push is meant to help providers hold on the reins for a while longer, yet. Without a clear policy control system in place to ensure that the proper customers are given the proper privileges, it's dangerously easy to risk either alienating a segment of your customer base already at high risk of churn (in that they have a strong preference for the app-based rather than TV-based experience) or opening the floodgates to widespread use by the unentitled.

And, of course, service assurance is a bit of a tricky beast with this model.

Theoretically, a Comcast customer could walk into a coffee shop with an iPad and watch an episode of a TBS sitcom, which would be delivered via Wi-Fi powered by AT&T. Comcast is technically the provider, but has no control over the LAN environment. If the user's experience is lackluster, who does he blame? And, perhaps more importantly, whose valuable call center time does he burn up trying to get to the bottom of the rotten QoS he has encountered?

These are complex questions, and ones not easily answered by service providers who are pushing to retain both a technical edge and a customer base that may have slipped too far beyond their collective grasp.

But what providers are realizing is that for at least a subset of customers, the way they want to watch TV has changed irrevocably. "The way viewers watch TV today has become a multi-screen, multi-tasking experience," AT&T said in a recent statement about its new social media-friendly U-Verse app suite. "According to Nielsen, nearly 30 percent of TV viewers looked up info related to a TV program while they were watching it." AT&T's choice to add apps like BuddyTV, which creates personalized viewing guides, and Miso, which provides users the option to share viewing choices with friends and comment on shows, are a reflection that where people watch isn't the only thing that's changing. It's also about how they watch.

The TV Everywhere story is in many ways the story of the support systems that reside beneath its glossy exterior.

So go on. Watch your way, wherever you like. Your couch will get over it. Let's face it, you guys probably saw too much of each other anyway.