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The Next Chapter for Fall VON

by Trevor Hayes

Everyone I talked to at VON in Boston agreed that VON was somewhat quieter than usual. Some blamed Halloween: anyone with children, grandchildren or other tiny relatives would feel obliged to stay at home and celebrate with family. This was news to me: a pumpkin in Boston looks pretty much like a pumpkin at home. Not that there were many pumpkins on the floor of the VON expo. The crowd was somewhat thin on the ground too, compared to previous VONs.

Jeff Pulver deserves a lot of credit for starting the VON show series. The early VON shows were polemical. They helped to raise VoIP consciousness and played a part in driving VoIP more into the mainstream. Now that IP and SIP have become mainstream technologies, there are sessions on these and related topics at every telecom trade show. Many of the same vendors turn up in booths at all of these events. In a crowded trade show market, events need some distinctive features and a well-defined community to serve.

In its early days, VON provided a great VoIP forum – where else could you go to discuss these things? Even now, in its more grown-up and staid manifestation, VON still stands up quite well as a venue for networking and getting some sense of where the industry is going. Yet, the people I talked to tended to agree on at least one thing: by contrast with the VON of only a couple of years ago, the show is no longer the unique forum it once was: is it evolving into just another trade show?

I asked a few delegates and exhibitors what they found exciting at this Fall VON. "Not much," was the usual answer. But was there food for thought? Yes, because even if the show was rather staid, people in this industry can always think up something interesting to talk about. Prompted by VON sessions, or by random conversations with VON attendees, I've picked out several topics that I found interesting.

People (at VON) are still talking a lot about **fixed mobile convergence**. Carriers still see FMC as a revenue opportunity, or at least a loyalty factor. Consumers really would like to have one number, multiple devices – and lower bills, which sort of goes against the revenue opportunity idea. FMC is worth money to businesses, but this seems to be being delivered by third party applications deployed within the enterprise rather than by the carriers. Consumers, if they're smart and have nothing better to do, can also build their own FMC, after a fashion, and save a few dollars, but most probably can't be bothered. Some people find it hard to keep their

Facebook profile up to date, never mind restructuring their personal communications ecosystem using all that VoIP/SIP stuff. Now if Apple would sell it in a shiny white box, that would be different.

Do **femtocells** enable FMC? Even after attending the VON session, I'm not too sure. Femtocells are small mobile cell sites in a box (not necessarily white and shiny) that mobile carriers hope people will install within their homes and offices. Each femtocell is connected to the outside world via the customer's own broadband Internet access. The panel at the femtocell session seemed to agree that there are distinctly different regional drivers for femtocell deployment. In the U.S., the case for femtocells seems to be based on the need to boost within-building reception. (In other words, the phone companies haven't built enough cell sites to deliver reasonable signal strength inside every home and office.) In Europe it is more about delivering 3G data services. (In other words European companies spent too much on 3G licenses so they've economized on backhaul.) In Asia, it's about filling in gaps in rural and low-income areas. (Those people already have broadband?) No one talked much about delivering compelling new levels of seamless FMC, which may not be as easy as it sounds.

Cellular companies all over the world love the idea of femtocells. Femtocells, from the wireless carriers' perspective must be a good thing if they reduce capital and operational costs and increase customer stickiness, all at the same time. But so far, the story is all about why the cellular operators want femtocells. The trick will be to actually make customers want these things, and maybe even pay for them,

Every show I go to, I hope that someone will explain how **IMS** is more than the sum of its parts. No luck this time, once again. Not that the individual parts – SIP, for example – aren't useful. But what – over and above those constituent parts – is this thing called IMS? Life is too short to work that out. Childishly, I'd like a child's guide.

PBXs are much easier to understand. Unfortunately according to Bill Gates, as reported recently in Network World, **the PBX is dead**. With a whole area of the VON floor devoted to Asterisk-based IP PBX solutions, and plenty of other IP PBX and IP Centrex vendors in evidence, it's difficult to believe that PBX (owned or

hosted) is dead or even doomed. Bill didn't turn up to explain, but surprisingly he had support on the floor. Apparently, what he *really* meant is that those big old hardware PBXs are no more, and the PBX has moved to software that can run on a generic hardware platform. No controversy there, Bill. You should have sent someone to VON in 1999.

While the PBX is clearly not dead (yet), there could be a useful discussion around the notion that all useful PBX functionality can reside in software anywhere – in a wide range of edge devices, and perhaps distributed securely over many devices. That brings us to the topic of peer-to-peer SIP.

Peer-to-peer technology, based on distributed hash tables (DHT), is undoubtedly cool. Everyone knows that kids use it to download content and irritate the RIAA and copyright holders. However millions use P2P quite legitimately - to make phone calls, send messages, transfer files, to distribute software. People are also building P2PSIP applications that provide the equivalent of PBX functionality without a centralized server. Proponents claim that P2 SIP can lower the barrier to entry for innovative new services, reduce costs, enhance personal privacy, and demolish traditional business models. P2PSIP networking is moving in to the mainstream, with the development of IETF standards. The concept of "mainstream" is relative. The big carriers found plain SIP-based VoIP difficult to embrace; no one is predicting that AT&T will adopt Skype-like technology and business models anytime soon.

It's difficult to attend any event without someone finding a way to bring in the latest hot topic – **social networking**. Jeff Pulver has found **Facebook** and is having fun. But he also makes a serious point; in his keynote address Jeff used the example of the power and popularity of Facebook and other Internet-based networking applications to remind carriers out there that people really don't need carriers to invent these new services for them; but they do need carriers to carry the bits. "As long as we can get to a world where carriers provide us with connectivity, and they're very polite and proper bit-bucket providers … it's all good."

Jeff Pulver did the industry a great service by inventing the VON events and being part of the groundswell for the adoption of IP into the world of telecommunications. And he can still convey a sense of excitement about the potential of this technology. He has a vision of a world in which this technology is used by people to communicate in ways never before possible in history, and he makes clear his irritation with things that get in the way, such as outdated legislation, inept regulation, obsolescent business models and over-protective corporate attitudes.

Jeff must surely be wondering if VON is still the sort of event he needs to further his agenda. IP and SIP are part of the establishment scenery, and can be made to fit nicely into a range of walled garden scenarios that don't exactly gel with the Pulver worldview. At this VON, AT&T rented a booth and presented sessions. And AT&T is very welcome, because AT&T carries lots of bits, and I've generally found AT&T people to be polite and proper so they clearly win Pulver approval. But where were Skype and Facebook? Or Sightspeed, Second Life, Disney, Vonage and Google? These are the types of companies that are creating the services that will define communications in the future.

VON started life as a forum that reflected the extraordinary changes in the industry at that time. Something extraordinary is still going on out there in the world of

telecommunications, but VON is starting to feel like just another telecom show, because yesterday's leading edge is today's ordinary. Fortunately, Jeff Pulver is still smart and energetic, and his keynote talk shows that he gets all this. Perhaps a reinvention of VON is not far ahead, to reflect this next generation of extraordinariness. We await developments with interest.

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