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Yair Sakov makes the case for real-time interaction

Mobile operators are currently struggling with the twin problems of customer retention and generating increased revenues from the subscribers they manage to keep. These two challenges can be resolved with the same solution, but to do this operators need to take a new approach to fulfilling customer needs.

The key is to provide a compelling and differentiated mobile experience for each individual. Operators must help consumers feel they are receiving personalised interaction and offer new and relevant services for them to enjoy. Customers should have the sense that they have control over their services and that the provider understands their needs.

The main value of mobile services is immediacy. When customers want something – voice calls, SMS, video clips – they get it there and then. This excitement for accessibility and immediacy can be built on to create a new model for mobile services, based on enabling real-time customer interaction.

Using this new approach, providers can deliver new services or enhancements in real time, as well as improving the actual service experience. The result would be greater stickiness of services and higher loyalty to the overall operator brand.

Operators need to adopt a new way of thinking, finding ways to deal with their customers in real time based on the buying and usage habits they display.

By placing highly desirable, yet low-priced, items near the checkout, supermarkets have created a method of increasing the cost of the average basket. Imagine the revenue potential if supermarkets could use customers' profiles to make specific "impulse" buy offers to individuals while they are waiting in the queue. This is what operators could do with mobile data services using real-time infrastructure.

They could, for example, immediately offer a free download when a customer crosses a certain threshold, such as £10 (€14.80) spent on data, or modify users' bandwidth availability when they use mobile video. They could also create dynamic loyalty-points schemes that are instantly credited and can be redeemed in seconds.

For customers downloading mobile games, operators could suggest other games of the same genre that they might wish to consider; or with a reality show, the mobile provider could respond to SMS votes in real time using offers such as voting score updates every 30 minutes for an additional £1.

For a subscriber trying to make a mobile VoIP call using a service such as Skype, which many operators do not sanction, a real-time system could recognise

that the user is attempting a Skype call. It could then block the call and push the subscriber towards an operator-sanctioned VoIP service for a monthly fee. The customer can then be presented with the price option to immediately purchase the service.

To adopt such approaches, operators need to track the actions on their network and respond to them before the information is lost in the OSS/BSS (operations support system / billing support system). Once the information is deposited in OSS/BSS databases, it becomes harder to retrieve, and any offers made to the user become out of date or irrelevant.

Meanwhile, the real-time model allows new services to be created based on interaction with and feedback from the customer.

Existing services can also be enhanced. For example, a customer watching a premium-priced newscast expects a certain quality of service (QoS). If it does not deliver the expected quality, the customer is likely to drop it. Using the real-time model, providers can instantaneously increase QoS to deliver the expected level of service.

Providing real-time customer interaction may seem like a costly venture, but it needn't be. Operators should target systems that are delivered as an add-on to existing OSS/BSS, rather than replacing entire systems. This will also help reduce the operational risk of integration and eliminate the possibility of negatively impacting existing services or affecting the billing system.

One system that can provide operators with real-time interaction is the business-control layer, a technology pioneered by FTS last year.

Measuring return on investment (ROI) from such a system should be easy. Since real-time customer interaction brings about new services, the revenue associated with these services can be directly attributed to the investment. In a recent implementation, an operator reported a payback period for a system, including software, hardware, and professional services, to be less than 12 months.

Somewhat more difficult to measure may be the impact of service enhancement on retention. However, it is certain that a new approach using real-time interaction can help to build brand loyalty and personalise user experience. As a result, operators can expect to increase ARPU, improve retention and grow their overall customer base.

Yair Sakov is vice-president of marketing and business development at FTS, a company that provides business control, billing and customer-relationship-management systems for operators.