

Who owns
the customer?
No one.

THE CUSTOMER IS IN CHARGE.

By George Malim
Telecoms Journalist

Mobile operators, in partnership with OTTs and MVNOs, can reassert their role in the communications value chain by becoming smart enablers of real-time experiences and by shifting their focus away from owning the customer.

A small group of companies built the mobile market up from nothing and in 25 years brought universal voice services, SMS, MMS, the mobile Internet, and a range of content and applications to their users. However, their pace of innovation started to lag behind that of Web companies over the last decade, which brought a series of applications to market that users wanted to mobilize their lives.

Internet search, social networking, user-generated content, file sharing, digital music, video content and the surge in availability of mobile applications, led by Apple and the Android ecosystem, all came to market in a period of five years.

Now that users have an abundance of choices from which to buy music, video, games and apps, they don't want to be told what to buy, and they don't feel owned by their operators. Instead, they will go to whoever meets their content *and* service needs best. Moreover, they expect their operators to support their needs with connectivity and access to acquire the content they desire.

This shifting consumer attitude cuts both ways. They are now in charge of their experiences, and all players in the ecosystem must adapt. Consumers have become accustomed

“Operator-focused real-time intelligence has the capability to deliver a 360-degree view of the subscriber experience.”

to being in control and will switch service providers immediately if a better experience is available.

Social networks like Twitter and Facebook are prime examples of how the landscape has changed. Operators are the enablers of immersive, effortless and immediate sharing of experiences across languages, cultures, borders and technologies alongside the social networking application providers.

That’s not without challenges for operators to overcome.

Tighter integration of social networking and interoperability between operators and social networks is required to provide the rich, ubiquitous experiences customers demand. This demand requires operators to integrate applications seamlessly through application exchanges or by tackling the arduous task of managing the handover across numerous operators and networks.

Operators are no longer attempting to be the gatekeepers and controllers of the content value chain. Their attitudes must shift from viewing third-party over-the-top (OTT) providers as threats to being more of valued partners in the service delivery chain, co-operating amicably to benefit customers.

Whether in the traditional Western European markets where operators face the erosion of voice revenues and roaming, the newly broadband North American wireless markets, the surging and predominantly prepaid Latin American market, the advanced customer bases of the Asia Pacific region, or areas of explosive subscriber growth such as India and China, operators have tremendous advantages to bring to the marketplace—stemming from their ability to do things at great scale in real-time, handle billing and charging relationships—to provide high-quality network connectivity and access to customers. Those advantages are as relevant to a regional wireless provider serving the rural Midwest of the United States as they are to a European teenager or a creator of user-generated video content in South Korea.

The trusted relationship operators have with their customers and their ability to empower them by supporting delivery of the services they choose gives them an even more critical role in the service delivery ecosystem.



That role is something they must protect.

As more suppliers enter the ecosystem, the line of quality control becomes fragmented, and operators have to protect their brand values while providing high quality of service to their customers. Operator-focused real-time intelligence has the capability to deliver a 360-degree view of the subscriber experience. If operators can receive alerts when compromises occur, the operators can quickly identify and solve any problems before a significant impact is felt by the end user.

They need to become the smart pipe that enables the portfolio of connectivity and supporting services that customers and partners demand. That means being as innovative as possible with the core competencies they already have.

Doing so solidifies their position and protects their brand whether that involves using accurate billing, using alternative technologies like Wi-Fi roaming to ensure high-quality wireless experiences, or understanding the need to engage with and enable an entire ecosystem of partners.

Subscribers want to access the content they choose, interact with the services they select, and enjoy a high-quality experience across the multiple service providers and technologies—on their terms. Learning how to get along is the real challenge, and opportunity for operators lies at the heart of the real-time exchanges that customers seek.

The potential is massive, and vast swathes of the market remain unaddressed. There is profit to be generated by all in embracing the reality that the customer is now in charge. ●

The author, George Malim, is a telecoms journalist. George has covered the telecoms market since 1999 and focuses on the technologies and strategies that enable operators to generate profits as the market transforms. George is based in London and serves as Associate Editor of Global Telecoms Business. www.whitelabelglobal.com