

Taming elephants - creating a connected consumer TV experience

by Paul Bristow, Vice-President of Strategy at Advanced Digital Broadcast (ADB)

For years, both the Internet and the home network have been elephants in the room, dominating the long-term thinking of Pay-TV operators. They were both seen more as a threat to existing business models than an opportunity to create new revenues. Today, many are now well on the way to delivering converged services often called Triple Play 2.0 - bringing together broadcast, Internet, and personal multimedia content in a unified experience, rather than simply providing voice, TV and broadband data access services.



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In the Pay-TV world, we're clearly doing something right. For a long time now the number of pay-TV subscribers has been continually increasing; today more than 45 per cent of the world's TV viewers choose to pay for television, according to analyst firm IMS Research.

At the same time, the broadband industry has also been doing a great job of rolling out ever-faster connections, making it easier to do Internet video. The results? There are now dozens of devices and hundreds of online

services competing for the attention of TV viewers. Google's recent unveiling of its Smart TV offering is just one example of how the landscape is changing. While we could take this as a threat we are actually leaping up and down in delight. Viewers are demanding more TV, greater levels of interactivity and advanced Internet applications via their television sets.

Nevertheless, as an industry we still enjoy making things hard for ourselves. We waste so much time arguing about technologies

that we seem to have entirely forgotten that TV is about entertainment! Some push for simple technologies that are easy to integrate, while in reality we should all just focus on making the user experience as compelling as possible. Consumers do not say, "I'll buy this product because it was easy for the engineers to make."

There are also a lot of talks in our industry about standardising on HTML. We seem to forget that HTML is more of an ever-changing ideal than a specification. Look at

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how often your browser gets updated on your PC. HTML is evolving with the coming of HTML5 and the embattled video tag. Once (and if!) this settles down, we might have a chance, but right now, trying to define ‘Internet TV’ is a waste of time.

So let’s talk about something other than technology - about viewers!

Despite all the new technology, viewers haven’t really changed their TV habits - probably because the industry isn’t making it easy for them. So what can we do about this?

We need to meet the consumers on their own terms - let them decide about content they want and where they want to watch or listen to it. It’s crystal clear. The future of Pay-TV is a consumer-driven hybrid, of broadcast + IPTV + Over-The-Top (content delivered directly over the Internet) + Home Networking content.

With this sort of hybrid service, the opportunities for Pay-TV operators to deliver new services are immense. When you connect your set-top box to broadband, you also connect it into your home network. This means not only sharing your personal content throughout the home - including with your TV and beyond. Pay-TV is very strong on the first, traditional, TV set but, as yet, isn’t a viable option for the secondary sets in most consumers’ homes. No one, when given the choice, chooses a second-rate experience on their second TV, and we believe that hybrid service will help drive pay-TV penetration to the second, third and fourth sets.

Nevertheless, as we add more services, it’s easy to forget the basics!

There is no reason it should take much longer to zap or simply turn on the TV than in the old analogue TV days - and no one is ready to accept a reboot during a football match!

Understanding what consumers want is often quite simple: they want everything and they want it precisely when they need it, in a straightforward, reliable manner. They don’t want to hear about DRM, CA, MPEG-4, VOD, DivX, HTML, HBBTV - or any of the acronyms the industry finds irresistible. If you think people are getting fed up with zapping slowly or crawling through a badly implemented electronic programme guide, just wait until you see how they react to a video-on-demand portal per channel!

To make the consumer TV experience work, all the complexity must be hidden. People want the simplicity, reliability and responsiveness of analogue TV. They want to be entertained, not spend hours searching for content.

We have to make this easy for the consumer - and if that is not easy for the device manufacturers then hard luck. It’s our job to take care of this complexity, for both consumers and Pay-TV operators.

To deliver this, you need a sustainable business model that supports the realities of hybrid service. Hybrid technology is complex from a software perspective, and it really matters how the set-top box software is optimised; it has to be ready for ever-growing range of tasks it must perform. The platform must also support on-going software upgrades to deploy continuous pay-TV innovations.

An example of what a connected consumer TV experience looks like is ITI Neovision’s ‘n’ - an early adopter of hybrid Pay-TV services. In Poland, when it launched in 2006, ‘n’ was the first service provider to offer advanced interactive services alongside its traditional broadcast TV. In 2009, it introduced a new, exceptionally rich, range of interactive services, enabled by a pre-integrated hybrid digital TV platform with an advanced user interface. The platform enables ‘n’ subscribers to seamlessly access both broadband and broadcast services; it shields them from the solution’s complexity and provides a responsive and simple user experience.

The new services, and the richness of possibilities they offer subscribers, have enabled ‘n’ to differentiate itself in an extremely crowded marketplace. It is the only service in Poland that allows a subscriber to access video from a variety of websites and view it on TV using a set-top box (STB). The websites include allegro.pl - a Polish e-bay equivalent; plejada.pl - offering celebrity gossip; and tvn24.pl. Subscribers can also access their photos, stored on the www.foto.onet.pl website, and view them on a television via any ‘n’ STB deployed on the operator’s network. This makes sharing images with friends and family on large screen televisions - rather than PC monitors - quick and easy. Subscribers to ‘n’ also enjoy remote access to their set-top box via the Internet or mobile phone, so they can record

content even when they do not have direct access to the device.

In 2010, ‘n’ will rollout multi-room functionality to further enhance their service. The ‘n’ service illustrates how rich the TV experience can be in a connected world.

The TV/Internet content convergence is radically changing the TV industry landscape, putting consumers back in control of their personal entertainment. The challenge now is to deliver this enhanced TV experience. There is a great opportunity to turn connected TV into a mainstream business, by uniting all the content available into a single intuitive search and navigation interface, integrated with a powerful and effective recommendation engine to help consumers pick out what they want to watch quickly and in effect recreate that old channel hopping experience. ●



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