

Service provider collaboration

by Diarmid Massey, Vice President, Carrier Services, Global Markets, Cable & Wireless Worldwide

The rapidly growing complexity of leading edge telecommunications and the growing demands of users for increasingly sophisticated and available services are stretching the resources of even the biggest telecom service providers. In response, managed services are back in favour with service providers to assist customers that seek to focus on their areas of core competence but want dedicated, end-to-end services. Symbiotic partnerships, with service providers collaborating worldwide, are helping create a global, integrated ecosystem that enables customers to meet their business goals.



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With the Internet now becoming a utility, social networking changing the dynamic of how people communicate and converged communications solutions transforming the way global organisations operate - network service providers find themselves at the cusp of a brave new world. Green priorities, anywhere / anytime communications and embedded intelligence just add to the complexity for providers who are expected to deliver services. Intelligent cities are emerging, seamless collaboration across the globe is a reality and technological development - once again - seems restrained only by the limits of imagination.

Traditional telecom service providers must now confront the huge challenge

of keeping up to speed with the world. What's more, the telecommunications industry is facing serious competition from heavy-hitting corporations such as Skype, Google, Microsoft and Cisco offering 'new-age' solutions to enable customers to connect, engage, and collaborate.

There is no rulebook to guide us through the current business environment; the world is in uncharted waters, and even many of the industry's 'experts' have not been able to provide guidance on how it will play out. All existing paradigms, adoption curves and spending predictions seem to be out-of-sync with business realities facing large corporations today. Across the world, tight budgets and a strict focus on metrics is driving investment. At

the same time, customer's risk appetite has gone through a significant change in the last 18 months. After years of investing to mitigate risk, organisations are now having to accept higher levels of risk to address capital and operating expense concerns. This has changed the way organisations consume IT and telecom services. Certainly, in our business, customers have significantly changed the way they design, build and manage their networks.

We believe that a singular focus on delivering great service to customers is the best way to stay in business. Corporations are looking at telecom service providers to deliver services that will help them meet their business goals. In such a scenario - we believe that only a diligent focus on

delivering significant business impact to customers will make a difference.

Delivering managed services

Individual users are driving and defining network consumption trends more than ever. Consumer IT and telecom trends are increasing enterprise trends, for example the iPhone is the preferred model of smartphone for corporate users today. The cleverer corporations are accepting social media channels into their offices; they are even leveraging them to drive change and innovation by creating a colleague-focused, state-of-the-age corporate workplace. Telecom service providers need to prepare for this next 'convergence' of consumer and corporate user trends in the workplace.

With growing specialization and focus, the discussion on managed services has made its way back into the corporate boardroom. Customers seeking to focus on their areas of core competence are looking for dedicated, end-to-end services. This is especially true in the B2B telecom space where end-to-end often means providing a resilient and secure service half way across the world. Network service providers face the challenge of becoming tier-1 managed service providers, delivering single points of contact to their customers, while managing all other partners and carriers, and providing 24x7 pre-emptive service and support to the corporation.

Customer businesses are extremely dynamic; they need to cater to changing markets and end-consumer demands. Intuitively then, they look for their service provider partners to be practical and provide flexible, yet innovative services. Tele-working is business as usual at most global corporations - most 'sales' focused employees are on the road, often travelling throughout the world. 'Always on' is the new 'normal'; employees demand location and access independent, converged access to applications, information and resources that help them handle their tasks more efficiently and effectively. Telecom services need to be reliable and resilient to be able to deliver to the standards expected.

No two organisations in the world are the same. Why, then, should so many telecom companies believe that delivering a standard solution to resolve the needs of different corporations is acceptable? Customers need customised solutions

to deal with their specific business requirements. Telecom service providers are being challenged to provide solutions geared to the specific needs of each individual customer.

Even as organisations negotiate through the challenges facing business today, they also need to plan for growth as we emerge from the economic downturn. Service providers need to work with their customer to help them prepare for the future - a future that is sustainable and enables them to transform their business in keeping with the shifting sands of customer preferences.

Leading telecom service providers understand the myriad social and technological trends that impact network and telecom usage - and the impact these dynamic trends have on employees, customers and stakeholders. Service providers who deliver solutions that are individual, managed, practical, always on, custom and transformational are the ones that deliver business critical communication solutions and enable corporations to succeed globally.

Corporate symbiosis - partnering with customers

An interesting fall-out of this unique convergence of social, economic and business trends has been the resurgence of old-fashioned business tenets, such as listening to customers, understanding their needs and providing them solutions that help them meet their business objectives. Most corporations have a back-to-basics approach to their technology needs. They are looking at solutions that directly impact their business, driving results and creating long-term value. Smart business-technology-based solutions that deliver real business benefits (lower travel costs, better network utilization, faster time to market, rapid training of sales team) have seen rapid adoption. This enables organisations to focus on getting the basics right - to get the best return on investment.

Today many companies are failing to meet customer expectations, often because they simply do not understand how the market place has shifted. However, even as the traditional rules of business are being re-written, we can find some inspiration from the words of the renowned Swiss hotelier César Ritz - who, in 1908, said, "The customer is always right". Clearly, Ritz - and the chain of hotels he inspired - made a mission and a successful global business

out of putting customers at the centre of everything they do. Indeed, the travel and tourism industry has pioneered the cause of the customer better than many other modern businesses. Creating a successful partnership model, that puts the customer at the core, has been central to the success in industry.

The ideal case in point is the alliance-based business model that almost every global airline works with today. Many of the largest and most successful airlines see the merit in working together with selected competitors to create an unprecedented model of co-opetition that offers customers a truly uniform service experience anywhere they fly across the world.

The success of this partnership model lies in the creation of a truly engaged, mutually beneficial relationship going beyond code sharing and bi-partisan airport infrastructure agreements. Member airlines of the Star Alliance for instance, share their customer profiles, offer preferred member services and provide special care to meet the typical needs of any Alliance member's frequent flyer programme. As hotel chains and car rental companies also become members of these alliances, the customer is promised the best possible experience end-to-end.

Outstanding service experience

The telecommunication industry has learned there are many benefits to be gained from sharing infrastructure, hardware, software and such to deliver a singular service experience to the customer.

The primary lesson they learned is the merit of building truly worldwide partnerships, focused on the customer's needs, which combine the special, often unique, expertise and capabilities of firms around the globe. In the cold light of the 21st century, global telecommunications companies have shed the vanity of the 1990s and have come to realise that no one company can reach every corner of the world by itself. Symbiotic partnerships that build and maintain a consistent view of the customer and translate that into delivering exception customer service are the way of the future and the means to creating a global, integrated ecosystem that enables customers to meet their business goals. ●