

EUROPEAN communications

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Where art thou, users?

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All mobile operators now offer their subscribers a massive choice of content. The only thing that's missing is the users. The key to success is to push interactive content direct to the idle screens of subscribers, says Yossi Wellingtonstein

"Build it and they'll come" is a risky way to run a business -- and one that simply hasn't worked in the mobile content world. Today content discovery is one of the biggest problems mobile operators face, following the massive effort to build-up huge content catalogues. Put simply, the fact that users don't know that so much content is waiting for them, and more importantly, don't know how to find it, explains why mobile data services still account for such a small proportion of operators' revenue, despite their best efforts to increase their share.

Operators around the world have realised that they can't wait for users any more. They have to bring content to customers -- and then make sure that it is easy to access. Anything too complicated, or requiring pro-active behaviour from the customer, just hasn't, doesn't and won't work.

A new approach is needed to let subscribers know that content is available -- and to encourage them to click through. Not only to build data traffic so mobile operators can start to generate decent revenues to justify their infrastructure investments -- but also in this competitive market, to provide services that add value and differentiate one network from another.

One answer to the content discovery problem is incredibly obvious and already being used by a number of operators around the world.

The solution: push content teasers to the screen of a mobile phone when the phone is turned on but not being used. Make these teasers free to the customer. Ensure that they vanish after a few minutes and are replaced with new headlines. Make the content relevant to that user. And finally minimise the number of clicks needed to access additional information linked to a teaser. Research has proven over and over again: clicks kill revenue. The more customers have to navigate, the less likely they are to bother.

A mobile phone screen with no content on it is a major missed opportunity. And a dead screen seems acceptable to customers -- until they see what they could be getting -- up-to-date information headlines for free with an easy way to access additional information and services. Operators need to make the idle screen a dynamic palette of intriguing content, news, games, offers, polls and real-time updates.

Commercially proven

Active Content to the idle screen is a technology that has proved itself commercially. According to operators already using it, over 90 per cent of users keep the service once it's introduced and over 30 per cent use it regularly, an unprecedented use of content services.

VimpelCom which operates as BeeLine GSM in Russia faced a problem common to all mobile operators -- it had spent considerable sums building its data networks, and interesting content was available to its customers thanks to a series of partnerships with content providers. However, customers just weren't accessing content from their phones.

VimpelCom's research showed that users simply didn't know how to find the content -- and if they did it required far too much effort. And so, VimpelCom decided it needed to take a proactive approach. In April this year it launched its "Chameleon" service, using technology from Celltick, to broadcast live content directly to the phone screens of its subscribers.

The Chameleon service sends streams of free news headlines, sport reports, weather updates, music stories, gossip and games directly to mobile phone screens. Just like a screen saver, the messages appear silently only when the phone is not in use.

Chameleon is very easy for customers to use and does not require any action on the part of the customer to start receiving the service. When they see a message that interests them and want to know more, they simply click on the OK button. A menu opens and presents various options. For example, a video news report or an automatic link to a WAP site or web page, or an SMS message with more information. A second click launches the desired service. And then the subscriber starts paying.

VimpelCom has invested in interesting and credible content, using brands such as MTV, Cosmopolitan and Playboy. It has created a countrywide team to run the broadcast operation, effectively working like a TV editorial team.

Chameleon targets all types of audiences, and can broadcast both to the entire subscriber base and to specific segments and locations, so content can be customised and localised to ensure that it is relevant and of interest to customers.

The results are staggering. During the first three months more than seven million data transactions have taken place with 50 per cent of enabled users reacting to the content on a regular basis.

Victor Markelov, Products Director at VimpelCom, said: "Our customers love Chameleon. We've finally found a way to provide them with an opportunity to use our data services actively. The easier the access to information and data services, the more often our customers use them".

Currently Chameleon is available to almost 3 million users, and VimpelCom plans to expand it to more than 10 million by the end of the year.

From a business perspective, the key to a successful Active Content system is sending free teasers to a vast number of users, while keeping the cost of these teasers low. It's a numbers game. The operator relies on a certain per cent of users clicking through, and therefore needs to send teasers to as many users as possible. But how to send these teasers cost-effectively? Say there are one million users and the operator wants to send 100 daily teaser messages to each of them. Doing it with any kind of point-to-point delivery will bring the network's SMSCs to its knees or eat up the GPRS capacity. Since these messages are not paid for by customers, this is certainly not a good use of the network resources.

There is a simple answer to this challenge -- enable mobile networks to send one message to many users simultaneously, or in other words, broadcast. Using broadcast, teasers can reach millions of users in real time without clogging the network and without using any commercial bandwidth at all. Since the broadcast capacity of the network is miniscule to begin with and allocated in advance, it makes the content teasers virtually free. This makes Active Content particularly attractive, since the variable costs associated with its delivery to idle screens is close to zero. When users click on a teaser, the terms change, a paid-for session begins and the operator starts seeing revenue.

Users love having content pushed to their screen because it provides free information, entertainment and timely updates with zero intrusion.

Operators love it because it increases traffic on data networks by solving the content discovery problem -- and in today's competitive market is an effective brand differentiator.

So why are you still hiding your valuable content and services deep inside your portal? It's time to bring it to the front. By activating the idle screen. n

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