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A Week in Wireless  
05 November 2004

Qualcomm punted out an interesting idea this week with the news that it is to deploy in the US a nationwide mobile multimedia broadcast -; or 'mediacast' -; network, that is intended to run in conjunction with 3G cellular services.

The mighty Q is to invest \$800m (although part of the sum may come from external partners) deploying the network -; in nationwide 700MHz spectrum for which it already holds licenses -; using its own FLO (Forward Link Only) technology. The theory runs that CDMA2000 and WCDMA operators that lack the capacity to distribute high volumes of bandwidth-hungry content to end users would be able to use the MediaFLO (a subsidiary set up to deploy and operate the network which will ultimately be spun off from Qualcomm) network to broadcast multimedia content, keeping their cellular networks free for point to point services. The whole project would depend on compatible multi-mode handsets being made available -; no doubt Qualcomm would be able to lend a hand with the silicon.

The Jacobs' are clearly tired of waiting for the mobile multimedia market to take off in the US. MediaFLO will support between 50 and 100 national and local content channels, said Qualcomm, including up to 15 live streaming channels, and will aggregate the content on behalf of the operating community. Commercial deployment is scheduled for 2006, by which time more 3G networks (WCDMA is moving slowly in the US, although CDMA2000 in its various guises is developing more impressively) should be up and running.

It seems unlikely that there would be an uplink element to the service but, from the requisite multi-mode handset, any uplink needs would be taken care of over the cellular network. Qualcomm plans to use much higher towers than those used in cellular networks, claiming less sites will be needed, especially with spectrum at 700MHz. It sounds like a good idea.

US operators have yet to voice an opinion on the plans but it will be interesting to see what their feelings are. It ought not to be taken as a threat; MediaFLO would need the mobile operators just as much as they would need its capabilities. And having someone else develop and deploy such a facility and then make it available for resale would take a weight off the Informer's shoulders, were he an operator. Given global spectrum allocation, though, it looks unlikely that Qualcomm would be able to replicate its plans (should they work, of course) in many other markets.

The arguments in favour of broadcast are fairly robust. Delivering this kind of content, point to point, to individual users would place a strain on any network. But broadcasting to mobiles over dedicated infrastructure would allow anyone to tune in when it suited them, as with TV.

Yaron Toren, business development director at Israeli cell broadcast firm Celltick is convinced that broadcast is the way forward. But, he told the Informer this week, the most likely technology to be adopted on a widescale -; the digital TV standard DVB-H -; will not be ready for commercial, mass market deployment for another four to five years.

What Celltick is pushing, and has been pushing for a number of years, is the use of cell broadcast technology to push data to end users. The service turns the handset screen into a multimedia billboard when it's idle and allows users to interact (and begin to spend) through standard data models when something they see tickles their fancy.

Celltick has been around for four years or so now and, thus far, commercial launches have been restricted mostly to developing markets. Hutch's operations in India have launched the service under the brand HutchAlive, with 1.8 million users having signed up as of August this year. Hutch claims that 40 per cent of these are regular paying users of the service and that churn among these users has dropped almost to zero.

Sri Lankan operator Dialog has also launched the service, said Toren, and it has also surfaced in China, Bulgaria, the Ukraine and Brazil.

But what about more developed markets? 3 Hong Kong is approaching deployment and Toren claimed to be working with an Italian operator and two of the largest operators in Europe, all of whom are, he said, currently specing out the service with planned launches some time next year. 2005 should also see, he promised, the largest ever Celltick deployment, somewhere in Central and Eastern Europe.

A two month trial last year with O2, focusing only on prepaid users, brought about an £0.90 increase on ARPU of £12 but the operator has yet to debut a full commercial service.

Next year could prove an interesting one for Celltick.

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