

Spotlight

A Week in Wireless

29 April 2005

Screen idle

There is nothing especially new about dynamic (or active) idle screens. Tasty tidbits of news are flashed across your handset screen in the hope that you won't be able to resist clicking on a link to access revenue-generating content. In fact, plenty of operators have been using the technology: examples include VimpelCom in Russia and AIS in Thailand, both of which recently went live with (appropriately) the LiveScreen product from Celltick, a company that describes itself as 'the global leader in active idle and mobile broadcasting solutions'.

Until now, Western European and US players have resisted the lure of such solutions. However, according to Yaron Toren, business development director for Europe at Celltick, that is about to change. Telefonica, in partnership with newspaper Marca, is just about to announce that it will be using LiveScreen in Madrid - no doubt to tempt its subscribers with countless stories about Real Madrid's transfer targets over the summer.

And, again according to Toren, none other than the mighty Vodafone is planning to launch a service later this year that, he alleged, bears an uncanny resemblance to Celltick's solution. The original name for the service was rumoured to have been LiveCast. That, however, was seen as too close for comfort to the Celltick's LiveScreen monicker, so Voda is now apparently planning to use the name LaunchCast.

"We were involved in the beginning, they saw our pitch and they built their own," said Toren. "It is difficult to get patent on a concept, so this isn't stealing. It happens all the time. It isn't wrong, it's just business. But I will say, from a small vendor perspective, you don't enter a deal with Vodafone and expect to make money."

A harsh claim and probably not verifiable, but Toren insisted that he is happy enough for Vodafone to launch the service, even though he wouldn't be making any money directly from it, as it at least validates the Celltick model. The point, said Toren, is that operators have been taking the wrong approach to selling data services. "M-content is like chewing gum: you don't go into a supermarket to buy chewing gum, that's why they sell it at the tills, because you buy it on impulse. It's cheap, unimaginative, you get bored of it after 15 minutes, so you buy some more," he said.

Voda remained cagey, but owned up to the fact that there may be more than a grain of truth behind the remarks. "It's something that we're looking at and we might be doing a trial later in the year," said a spokesperson. "From my understanding, it's like a ticker that scrolls across the screen and if you're interested in a story you can click on it and be taken down into the Vodafone live! screen," although she had doubts about the name. "I would be surprised. I thought LaunchCast was a Yahoo! music download service."

Which indeed it is. So either Toren is mistaken or Vodafone is going to have to try, yet again, to find a name that isn't too close to anyone else's. One way or another we'll soon find out whether Vodafone's interest in this service really is dynamic - or just idle.