

Operators can make triple play sing by providing mobile access to broadcast services from laptops, handsets and TV sets away from home. CommuniGate systems helps operators deliver unified entertainment

Unleashing the power of triple-play — and quad-play

For many operators, deploying triple-play has so far been an exercise in keeping up with their competitors rather than a positive move to create new revenue or value. Their customers have benefited only from getting the three ingredients of voice telephony, internet access and TV services for the price of two or even one, and for the operator any added revenues have been offset by the higher capital and operating costs.

Yet while there is no immediate prospect of raising the price of triple play services, there is great potential for attracting and retaining customers by adding real value through integration and in particular enabling them to access their TV services remotely via the internet. So far the three parts of triple-play, or four parts of quad-play when mobile services are included, have tended to exist in isolation, failing to exploit the added value achievable by combining their forces.

The typical triple-play package from cable operators for example comprises TV and video on demand delivered to some device within the home, incorporating a set-top box for video, cable modem for internet access and a telephone port. If mobile communications is also included in a quad-play package, this will probably also provide internet access, but otherwise there is often no significant overlap between the four service ingredients.

Crucially, such a package has little stickiness, in that there is no reason why customers should not immediately churn to a competitor offering a similar package for a lower subscription.

Yet operators now have two-way networks capable of linking back to the internet and tying the different services together in various ways that will make their overall package far more compelling and sticky. Some operators are starting to grasp this opportunity and are already reaping the benefits of increased customer retention. They are also attracting new customers by being ahead of the game and offering services that really draw together the different threads of mobility, video, internet access and voice telephony.

The greatest appeal for many consumers lies in the combination of video and mobility. Early mobile TV services delivered solely to conventional handsets with a small display have shown that people are more willing than expected to watch long-form content such as episodes of soap operas and even full-length movies. It had been thought mobile TV would appeal only for clips and trailers lasting at most a minute, given the limited display resolution, but people are quite happy to make do with the lower quality when there is no alternative.

Apple's iPhone and emerging smartphones with bigger displays can only increase the appeal of mobile TV, analyst firm SNL Kagan to predict mobile video/TV will grow at 22.5% a year over the next 10 years compared with 12.7% for games and 13.1% for music.

With triple-play, operators can go much further than just offering access from mobile handsets, by allowing customers to get their full TV and video package not just on mobile handsets within the region but on any device anywhere in the world with internet access.

CommuniGate Systems is now helping operators leverage their triple-play packages in this way through its mobile unified communications software, which provides the hook for remote access to video via their latest web 2.0 client, Pronto!

This delivers multimedia content to the browser via the Adobe Flash player, which is overwhelmingly favoured for transmission of video over the internet to PCs. Similarly the stripped down Adobe Flash Lite software has been adopted for delivering multimedia and TV by the leading mobile phone companies including Nokia, Sony Ericsson and Motorola, as well as by consumer electronics device makers.

The key point for triple and quad-play is that the latest Flash 9 software supports the H.264/MPEG-4 video compression standard, which is the best mechanism for delivering IPTV over the internet to laptops or PCs at the prevailing bit rates.

So because Pronto! is H.264 capable, CommuniGate Systems can create a module that will allow access to IPTV services on any video device with access to the internet, wherever it is. This could be a PC in a friend's home, or potentially when the user is sitting in a hotel room and wants access to the content they get at home.

Through a Pronto! IPTV module, operators can enable their customers not just to view all the channels and video-on-demand content they have paid for, but also to manage their PVR remotely. This will really liberate IPTV services from the geographical straightjacket that has constrained them so far, which has confined access not just to a single country or region, but to the living room of each consumer. The system can also show an on-screen message when a voice or email has arrived.

Given the convenience and luxury of such services that draw together all the strands of triple or quad-play, including video, mobility and unified communications, operators will find their customers become less likely to churn, and slightly less concerned over the exact cost of their package. ■