Billing & OSS Show 2004 In Washington, DC

Observations Of The Show, Vendors, And Technologies Showcased

By Bruce Bahlmann, CEO ■ *Birds-Eye Network Services*

For those of you who missed this year's Telestrategies Billing & OSS (Operational Support System) Show in Washington, DC, here is an overview of the show and potentially a glimpse of where OSS/BSS is headed. Although I was unable to visit every booth on the floor and attend every presentation, I did get around quite a bit and was able to engage in numerous conversations with different vendors.

The one thing I noticed in going to this show was that while attendance was sporadic, certain speeches seemed to draw a good crowd. The Billing & OSS Show presentations outlined a number of upcoming technologies as well as numerous successful installations/deployments. The hot topics from service providers' viewpoint were clearly:

"With the numbers of existing subscribers mounting, the challenge facing billing and OSS/BSS vendors is their ability to effectively scale up to supporting tens of millions of subscribers."

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- Reselling of the line. Looking for ways telecommunications operators could collect multiple times (sell many times over) services over a single communications link. This area is becoming even more important as the price for basic broadband connectivity begins to drop in response to competitive pressure.
- Deliver new services that increase customer intimacy. Provide ways that would assist telecommunications operators in staying in touch with their customers and/or drive a strong product branding. Since there are very few (if any) actual differences between various telecommunications operator services driving a strong brand, or facilitating communications with subscribers is becoming increasingly important. In many cases the only communications between telecommunications operators and their subscribers is the monthly bill.

Many other topics were discussed in and around the show but in according to my observations the above items seem to capture the majority.

What is on the Horizon?

With the numbers of existing subscribers mounting, the challenge facing billing and OSS/BSS vendors is their ability to effectively scale up to supporting tens of millions of subscribers. Another challenge for telecommunications operators is the availability of tools to make better, smarter, more forward-looking business decisions.

- Grid computing. Billing vendor CSG provided a stimulating look into the use of the grid as a viable platform for tomorrows billing and OSS/BSS solutions. CSG divided companies with compelling grid offerings into two categories: large billing companies looking for more processing resources to speed up massive computational tasks and much smaller but new OSS companies looking to innovate beyond the means of existing billing or OSS solutions.
- Service offerings based on predictive analytics. Amdocs offered a glimpse of what the back office might look like if it were based on intelligent use of predictive modeling. What is interesting about this approach is that in some cases the telecommunications operators have had this data lying around for years but finally now have the means to exploit its use to make their businesses more responsive to subscriber needs.

While one would think that predictive analytics would easily arrive before we see full-blown grid computing applications the sheer numbers of companies working in each of these areas will be the deciding factor. I would have to agree with CSG that there will be viable grid solutions that compete with larger trusted billing and OSS/BSS solutions within a year's time. The issue of eco-

nomically feasible scalability is just way more important at this stage. Analytics, while very compelling from a business standpoint, is a technology perhaps still ahead of its time.

New Terminology

During my adventure in attending this show, I came across some new terminology related to OSS that I found of interest.

Process-centered OSS: A term championed by Sprint, which means an OSS that is process centric. Sprint defines a process as "sequences of work that must be performed to meet key business goals & obligations".

One could argue that most OSS solutions actually meet this requirement today. However, not all OSS solutions support customized workflows. Rather, many of them are still hard coded so I would have to side with Sprint who seems ahead of the curve in understanding how to exploit OSS for improving its business.

Key Technology Drivers

Primarily I found that most technology drivers seemed discussed in relation to wireless services. Some possible drivers were offered up by Convergys, who had some interesting things to say about supporting the mobile market.

- The rise of Digital Rights Management (DRM) systems and the need for the control of the consumption of content and the support of a usage based model for applications (Convergys)
- The explosion of intelligent mobile/fixed consumer devices i.e. smart devices (Convergys)
- The arrival of trusted computing environments (Convergys)

My take on these drivers surrounds two areas: Content provisioning and intelligent endpoints. Content provisioning will become an increasingly common place among OSS/BSS solutions once telecommunications operators are able to elevate themselves above their current operational hurtles (provisioning lines and services) and realize the fact that there is a whole lot more money to be made in orchestrating the selling of content than selling connectivity and various services. DRM is critical to enforcing individual use and eliminating illegal copying. I am a strong advocate of content provisioning especially since such a business (selling content) is not only proven; it represents the most successful business on the Internet. I won't say the name of this successful business but it starts with a "p" and ends with an "n".

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tions operators' OSS/BSS solutions. Essentially, if you place the power to provision services within smart devices, the back end systems for such services are greatly simplified.

Key OSS Goals and Business Drivers

The following is a listing of just some of the goals and business drivers that were dropped at the show. This list is by no means complete and I would argue that it may not be totally accurate, but so far as various vendors are concerned, these are the needs they are attempting to answer with their latest product development efforts:

- Cost effectively provision and maintain an increasingly wide variety of access methods (Sprint)
- Acquire next-generation provisioning systems that offer real-time/near-real-time provisioning that can also be secured to allow customer self-provisioning (Sprint)
- Reduce service delivery/restoration intervals (Sprint)
- Enable actively-managed SLAs per service instance (Sprint)
- Establish active feedback mechanisms between service assurance and service delivery components to manage SLAs at the service instance level (Sprint)
- Need to control access to digital content (Convergys)
- Investment in Heterogeneous Networks (Convergys)

Coming from the cable industry and having grown up with that technology, I found it very interesting to see the overall maturity that larger telecommunications operators like Sprint have with respect to Service Level Agreements (SLA). It is quite astounding how well some telecommunications operators have addressed the importance of delivering SLAs—a key feature in seriously going after business accounts.

Next Generation Broadband-Enabled Applications

Listening to an interesting presentation by Verizon about supporting various broadband applications prompted the last area I wanted to address. Here is a listing of some of the applications that seem to be in the works:

- Video conferencing (Verizon)
- File sharing (Verizon)
- Distance learning (Verizon)
- Multi-player gaming (Verizon)
- Telemedicine (Verizon)
- Real-time video (Verizon)
- Hi-definition video multicasting (Verizon)
- Network hosted software (Verizon)

One personally interesting addition to this list was telemedicine. I am very happy to see telecommunications operators and the public health segments joining forces to provide for better public services.

Hope you found this useful. If you did (or even if didn't), please drop me a note and tell me your thoughts. ■

About the Author

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