TheRecord

BOB DEHAVEN: MICROSOFT

Winning the heart of customers is becoming increasingly difficult for comms and media companies, a problem which is compounded by the fact that audiences have access to tens of thousands of channels on a wide variety of different platforms.

In the following pages, Tony Emerson tells us how Microsoft's rich media on demand solution is helping new players to increase customer loyalty and grow at unprecedented rates. Meanwhile, Rainer Kellerhals explains how, by putting their customers at the centre of their business processes, telco companies will be far better equipped for the future.

Delivering rich media on demand

There's a race going on to deliver media to virtually any device, anywhere and anytime. Tony Emerson explains how Microsoft Azure is empowering the front-runners

Traditional media companies have huge repositories of content, but all too often are held back by linear distribution models. But, at a time when consumers expect to be able to devour this content anywhere and on any device, these companies need to up their game or risk excluding an entire generation who demand flexibility in their consumption.

What is required is for media companies to digitally repurpose their assets and deliver over a digital network (commonly called over the top television or OTT). But they need to go about it the right way. Moving to this kind of service means that there are 10,000 or more channels – a virtual minefield in which key content can easily get lost. So search and discoverability are key, as is personalisation and recommendation functions.

What's clear is that, if traditional players don't act fast, then someone else will. Smaller new entrants don't have the baggage that the industry mainstays have – they're more agile and therefore able to go to market quickly and effectively.

Sling TV is a great example. In its infancy, the company delivered your satellite signal to you, wherever you were, over the internet. Today it's a skinny bundle of broadcast channels – including ESPN – delivered over the internet for US$20 a month. The company is now enhancing its

packages with more choices and channels and has grown to a million subscribers in just a year and a half. Sony and AT&T are quickly trying to follow suit, but there's no question that Sling TV has disrupted the market.

This huge shift in the way media companies need to deliver content requires a reliable platform, and this is where Microsoft comes into play. Its rich media on demand solution is already enabling players like Fuji TV to grow at unprecedented rates and the fact that it is highly scalable means that as these companies grow, so does the platform.

Users can create end-to-end media workflows with flexible encoding, packaging and distribution services using Microsoft Azure Media Services. They can very securely upload, store, encode and package video or audio content for on-demand delivery to a wide array of TV, PC and mobile device endpoints.

This type of solution will equip media companies long into the future – a future which more than likely will be made up of apps. A future where data about what consumers are watching is key. And a future where user experience is absolutely critical. ∎

Tony Emerson is worldwide managing director for Microsoft's media and cable division

"The way media companies deliver content requires a reliable platform, this is where Microsoft comes into play"

The evolution of customer service

RAINER KELLERHALS: MICROSOFT

Running a successful telco or cable company against today's backdrop of unprecedented change requires a customer-centric approach

The telephony, internet access, television and mobile services provided by telco and cable companies today are generally considered to be commodities. These are services that, with revenues being almost flat in developed countries, have reached the peak of their revenue growth in developed countries. Even globally, the CAGR of telco and cable revenues is a modest 2%. With this in mind, telco and cable companies today can only compete on one thing: customer engagement, encompassing all touchpoints with the consumer from marketing to sales and customer service.

> "The vast majority of players are held back by disparate systems that do not talk to each other"

However, while the race is on for service providers to provide the best possible customer experience, the vast majority of players are held back by disparate systems that do not talk to each other.

These silos are a significant inhibitor to improving the customer experience. While customers expect their telco or cable provider to treat them as a valued customer, in practice it may happen that after they rang customer service about an issue with their fixed line, just a few hours later they might get a phone call from the telesales department trying to upsell them to a high-speed broadband connection. This causes frustration and a general feeling from customers that they aren't understood.

A 360-degree view of the customer is therefore essential, linking different business functions as well as different channels.

At Microsoft, we are helping telco and cable companies such as nTelos in the US, Moov Côte d'Ivoire in Africa and TekSavvy Solutions in Canada, to achieve this through the use of Dynamics 365 – a unified platform that brings together retail, marketing, customer service, field service and social engagement. This provides everyone across the company with the same view of the customer, eliminating disconnects and dramatically improving insight.

We are well aware that a 'rip and replace' approach won't work here – we don't expect our customers to change their wings while flying! Instead, the Dynamics platform can connect to existing systems, providing the unifying layer that is required in a cost-efficient, non-disruptive way.

By putting their customers at the centre of their business processes, these companies will be far better equipped for the future – a future where, according to a new report by Walker, the customer experience will be increasingly important, and by 2020, even more important than product or price. ∎

Rainer Kellerhals is director of business development in Microsoft's Worldwide Communications and Media Industry Organisation

Putting chatbots into action

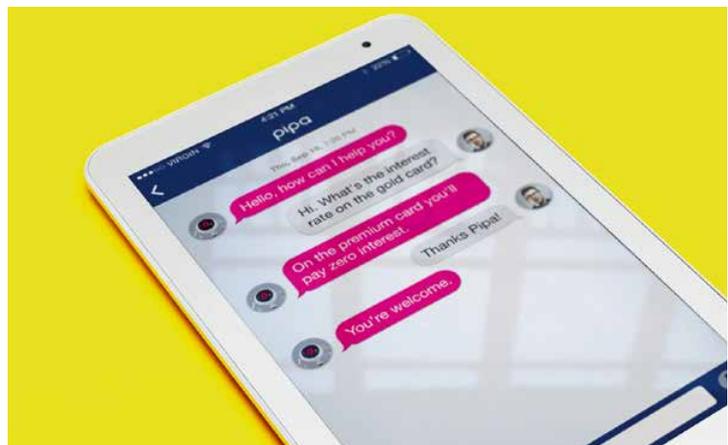Pipa is helping T-Systems employees easily retrieve documents and book meetings with simple chat commands

As a global technology leader, it's important that T-Systems explores breakthrough innovations within its own business. Often, services are tested and refined within the company, and then released out into T-Systems' client environments as fully-fledged offerings.

With this in mind, it stood to reason that T-Systems would be one of the earliest adopters of 'Pipa', formerly known as Robit, a revolutionary chatbot developed by T-Systems' own subsidiary, Intervate.

Pipa, which is accessible via Skype for Business and as a web chatbot on the Microsoft bot framework, currently offers two primary features. The first is integration into SAP to enquire about invoicing and statements. Pipa understands the permissions of every user, and helps staff requesting documents from deep within the legacy SAP environment.

"Staff no longer have to wade through complex back-end systems; instead, they can retrieve documents with just a simple chat conversation," says Dave Stevens, business development executive at Intervate. "Conservatively, we estimate that this saves account managers seven to eight hours per month. In a team of 25 account managers, this adds up to a significant annual saving of over 1,500 man hours."

The second feature Pipa offers is the ability to book meeting rooms across all of the various T-Systems and Intervate regions. "With Pipa, staff can book meetings via one helpful, chat-based interface. Based on a short conversation to understand your requirements, she'll find appropriate rooms. Staff can even invite colleagues and customers to meetings using Pipa, and sessions will be automatically synced to one's Outlook calendar. If a

Delivered through Skype for Business, Pipa has been developed to quickly and intelligently assist in fulfilling administrative tasks

previously-unavailable room becomes available, she'll to let you know."

These simple but useful services allow the company to get to grips with chatbot technology in a practical way. "We've already moved beyond the 'gimmick' phase, and received highly positive feedback from early users, and tangible benefits," he says. "It also serves as a great lead-in to a new way of working, where staff are able to be more remote, more flexible, and yet still access the entire spectrum of corporate services."

Looking ahead, Stevens says that Pipa will grow in sophistication, and will likely benefit from the rapid advancements of Microsoft's Cognitive Services framework. "Pipa is already able to answer common queries in over 60 supported languages. In time, she will connect with other specialist chatbots from different fields, 'borrowing' their intelligence (and lending some of her own). This future state of 'bot convergence' will serve up some exciting opportunities, forever changing the way we work and the way we connect with organisations." ∎

Let the transformation begin.

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