EXPERT OPINION:

Service assurance in the service of BSS

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Imagine this conversation: a mobile business customer receives the following customer care call. "Hello Mr. Jones. We would like to notify you of a mobile service disruption currently affecting the midtown business area. We apologise for any inconvenience and expect to resolve this issue within the hour."

What sounds like a simple proactive outbound customer communication is an end product of two parallel business processes, now brought together, the BSS customer management and OSS service assurance, in the pursuit of maximising retention and loyalty.

Cause and effect

The importance of customer experience and its contribution to customer satisfaction and loyalty have been widely discussed in the industry. Service providers have been investing in both directions: implementing sophisticated service assurance capabilities on the one hand, and enhancing customer management capabilities on the other, in order to deliver the best service possible to their customers and fight defection.

Network Operations Centres (NOCs) have evolved quite dramatically over the last few years. From focusing on identifying network impairments and fixing them, operators realised the fundamental role of the operational know-how in managing and operating services and maintaining high levels of user experience. With that in mind, service assurance capabilities evolved to provide customer-centric capabilities: Network and service quality monitoring were deployed to provide alerts of quality degradations, alarm prioritisation highlighted the relevant ones, and with efficient information flow the mean-time-to-repair metrics were greatly improved.

In the meantime, customer relationship management teams have also been improving acquisition and retention abilities and tools in order to accommodate the "new customer" – the customer who understands the market and competition, seeks greater involvement and independence, and is constantly looking for new excitements.

But no matter how efficient both processes become, the dichotomy in these core competences prevents service providers from achieving the optimum result in terms of customer satisfaction. Customer management teams are still in the dark when it comes to understanding the cause of the problems and how these should be communicated to customers. Operations management, which stores an enormous amount of relevant information about service impairments, has difficulty in understanding the context of problems and thus the effect on customers. The way to address this situation is to create a synergy between the two entities, in a way that they can better complement one another.

From necessity to opportunity

The path to achieving these capabilities is an expansion of the trends that led to modern customer-centric service management, proven to be particularly popular and effective among next-gen and other technologically heterogeneous networks. As many service providers began to consider the management of fixed-mobile convergence as a major factor in delivering premium customer experience, they correspondingly introduced OSS transformation initiatives. These initiatives aimed to dismantle the legacy "stovepipe" management architecture in order to shield their customers from the underlying network complexity and leverage the full breadth of convergence advantages.

Whether transformation initiatives are ▶

carefully planned or enforced by circumstances, we identify two common transformation phases currently carried out by service providers: the consolidation of redundant system management tools and the integration of adjacent OSS functionalities into a single platform. It was exactly this sort of integration that led to the cutting edge, customer-centric management that has simplified operations and equipped operators with the tools to manage converged networks efficiently. At that point, however, customer satisfaction is not accomplished at its full potential.

At this stage in the OSS transformation, a follow up phase should now be considered in order to achieve customer satisfaction to a larger degree: not just technology wise, but of the entire service delivery. This involves the integration of operational and customer management capabilities, which reside respectively on OSS and BSS platforms. Many service providers will understandably proceed to the current phase with caution in light of past experience in the industry, although this phase is qualitatively different from earlier OSS transformations and the benefits at hand may have the greatest implication on their customers' satisfaction.

Building the interface

To tackle this dilemma and still enjoy the fruits of OSS and BSS integration, operations and customer management teams should at least establish a direct interface that will leverage operational information directly towards customer care. Going back to the service disconnection problems experienced by Mr Jones, operations use the drop-call metric and its association to a cell of a specific hardware vendor to resolve the problem.

Customer care, on the other hand, need a general characterisation of the disruption, its geographical consequence, and the affected customers for customer management purposes. By creating a linkage between the operational attributes and customer-related attributes of the problem, and injecting this information in real-time to customer care, service providers can optimise their resources to immediately impact customer satisfaction.

The above is just one example of the various ties that have to be defined through the operations OSS to customer care BSS interface. With the complexity of services and offering this interface can evolve to a critical business path that has to be constantly nourished. This will require a versatile OSS platform that is not only compatible with all services and technologies, but also possesses the ability to identify the event attributes that are of interest for the two purposes, establish the real-time linkage between operations and customer management service models, and provide a bi-directional notification mechanism.

Harnessing operations in customer retention

Shielding the customer from underlying network complexity need not entail hiding operational implications entirely, particularly now that service assurance technology has developed to a point that it can actively contribute to the customer's satisfaction.

It is important to keep in mind that even if the service disruption suffered in the example of Mr Jones is resolved swiftly, it impacts on customer satisfaction not only during the brief moments of actual service degradation, but during the following days or weeks in which Mr Jones is left to wonder when the problem will resurface, and whether the service provider knows or cares about it. This can be particularly true of new subscribers, who recently demonstrated their sensitivity to these issues by churning away from their previous provider.

In light of the trends in OSS transformation and the level of customer experience expected from a provider, this is the next logical step. Just as OSS deployments have gradually evolved to create customer-centric service assurance, we can now begin to integrate OSS and BSS functions to create a customer-facing service assurance, which will not only expand on the efficiencies gained from OSS consolidation and integration, but also take more of an active role in subscriber retention and loyalty, and even enable service providers to revolutionise their approach to service delivery and customer care.

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VanillaPlus Jargon Buster

BSS: Business Support Systems

NOC: Network Operations Centre

OSS: Operations Support Systems