Accanto grasps new customer service assurance markets

Michele Campriani, CEO of Accanto Systems
Michele Campriani headed the OSS solutions division of **HP** until 2007 when he was appointed CEO of **Sunrise Telecom**'s Protocol Products Group (PPG). With his background in OSS, he saw an opportunity to leverage the test and measurement technology that had been developed in Sunrise over the previous 12 years and to bring PPG into the operations support systems (OSS) world. Over the last two years, the division has become an independent, VC-funded company and been re-named **Accanto Systems**, transforming itself from a test tools provider into a significant service assurance solution player. Accanto is Italian for "close to" and, in some contexts, "I'm on your side". The name reflects the company's willingness to be a partner for its customers and not just a box supplier.

VanillaPlus: Accanto Systems seems to have come out of nowhere to be a major player in Customer Service Assurance. How did that happen?
Michele Campriani: We have a long history as part of Sunrise Telecom, which emphasises that we are not a start-up. From the beginning, we have concentrated on designing a well thought out architecture that can address almost any network interface, can be expanded via software modules and can easily integrate into a large system. This has ended up really paying off for us, and has put us in a position where we have often won against larger competitors.

In addition, cost-efficiency resulting from technological innovation and the capability to bring information with high value to different levels of the service provider's organisation, has created an incredible momentum, resulting in continuous business with our installed base and the acquisition of new customers.

VP: What changes did you make following your appointment?
MC: As you know, in the last two years we have transformed ourselves from a major test tools provider into a leading service assurance solution player. Now, we are able to capture traffic data from convergent networks and transform that into real time information on the subscribers' experiences.

Owing to our focus on systems and solutions, the synergies with Sunrise Telecom were fading away and that's when Sunrise Management and I decided to sell Protocol Products Group and announced the creation of Accanto Systems in late 2008.

I found a great merger partner in LTE Innovations, a leading OSS consultancy, and strong funding from the Capman Group, a stable investor with high levels of competence in the telecoms market. Since then, I have been steadily moving the company to be a leader in Customer Service Assurance systems.

VP: How would you describe your company's culture?

MC: Accanto Systems started in Modena, Italy, a region that has a history of great engineering and innovative technology. The entire region is home to great entrepreneurship. We were also fortunate in being able to hire people from HP, Nokia Siemens Networks, Ericsson, Agilent, Tektronix, JDSU and other top tier companies who really understood networks and recognised the potential of Accanto. And, of course, being in Italy we are all very passionate! This has translated into a company that is strongly passionate about its customer needs, easily identifies with them, and has the flair and creativity to do more with the same technological resources. As we have expanded, we have attracted people in Finland, the U.S. and Asia, but we seem to have held on to this culture. I guess another way to put this is that we greatly value being a trusted advisor and we work hard to do the right thing for our customers.

VP: You mentioned Customer Service Assurance as Accanto's main focus. Can you explain what you mean by that?

MC: Service providers are facing increased competition and customer churn. As a result, more and more customers are basing their choice on the experience they have with a given provider. In the case of mobile services, this experience involves dropped calls, devices that don't configure properly, voice quality, unacceptable Web browsing experience, and so on. It has become necessary for operators to transform themselves from being connectivity providers to being service providers who can deliver data services and Web 2.0 applications.

Service providers have historically monitored the performance of the network and assumed this translated into good customer and service quality. For some operators, performance monitoring only covers the network, while others view the performance of the network and the service. But even that is no longer enough – a holistic view must combine these two parameters with a clear view of the customer experience. This correlation of network, service and subscriber information is critical in delivering high quality of service. Another critical aspect is the 'point of view'; in other words, that the same information can be aggregated in different ways. Aggregating by Network Element gives the operator the ability to address specific concerns, such as: which nodes are providing the worst service accessibility or how certain node impairments are affecting actual service quality.

However, aggregating by Subscriber (for example, VIPs) enables the operator to address the question of which customers or groups are experiencing the worst service accessibility. Aggregating by specific service provides the operator with the ability to examine which services are the most difficult to access, or which services are the most popular, with whom and at what times of the day.

The capability to integrate with other systems (such as trouble ticket systems, customer relationship management, fault management, etc.) is also a factor. Accanto has created the probes, data collection software and reporting views to make this fast, easy and affordable. Along with these functionalities, we also offer an OSS consultancy team that enables us to better serve our customers.

VP: Can you tell us a bit more about your target customers? What do they do and where are they found?

MC: Our initial focus was on tier 2 and tier 3 service providers in Europe and nearby countries. But as our systems began to grow in size and scale, we started picking up tier 1 providers like Telecom Italia, Orange, BT and Vodafone.

We have also been selling more into the U.S. lately with customers like **Qwest** and into the Central American and Caribbean region with the likes of **Digicel**. We have just opened two offices in Asia and are already experiencing an incredible momentum there. The result is now over 180 customers in 60 countries, with a 25% growth rate in 2008. Plus, we already acquired 20 new customers in 2009, so the momentum is continuing!

VP: What do you think differentiates you from your competition?

Initially, it was our innovation and agility. Accanto was the first to introduce the CDR (call detail record) in protocol analyser and the first with a server-based remotely-accessible protocol analyser. Then, over time, a key differentiator became scalability. Our hardware accepted a broader cross-section of network interfaces and our software was very easy to expand. Given these advantages, we were able to use fewer probes and were easily able to give providers any intelligent views they needed. So now, it is price and flexibility as well.

Nowadays, we are the only ones that can provide high cost-efficiency with sophisticated customer service assurance capabilities. And our latest solution, which integrates directly into a CRM environment down to a low-level network troubleshooting capability, is unique in the market.

VP: Speaking of the market, where do you see this customer service assurance sector heading?

MC: We are being strongly motivated by two main drivers: first, the explosive growth of data applications over mobile and, second, the need to put all services over a converged network.

All the providers we are working with are moving quickly to transition their legacy networks to higher bandwidth IP-based networks that can handle multimedia traffic more efficiently. Lastly, the challenge of keeping a high quality customer experience and holding down the churn to a low rate will only become more urgent in the years ▶

"We now know that both the quality of the service and the quality of a given customer need to be monitored separately."

ahead. This will result in a much stronger role for customer care groups and marketing teams in the network or service operations centre (NOC or SOC) of the future. Accanto's ability to integrate our solution with other OSS systems and applications will give us an advantage.

VP: If you were to describe Accanto Systems five years from now, what picture would you expect to paint?
MC: I think Accanto Systems will always look for new ways to meet the needs of its customers, especially in the area of intelligent customer service assurance (iCSA) systems. This theme will carry us into a lot of areas for years to come.

But there are still many unanswered questions about what's coming: What tools do the customer care and marketing departments need to ensure high quality customer experiences? How do we better monitor applications, services and network efficiency for our service providers? And, what new mobile platforms will come out that will create new ways to extract revenue, which will therefore need to be monitored?

With the advent of Mobile 2.0 (i.e., lifestyle services) operators must invent new ways to charge for specific applications; for instance, a service provider recently introduced a flat rate (€2.00/month) for connection to **Facebook**, where connectivity is limited to that application only.

Since the granularity of charging will more and more come down to specific applications or services, a monitoring solution capable of analysing and providing QoS reports at the same level of granularity will become increasingly important.

Most of all, perhaps, how can we enable service providers to offer new and compelling bundled products and services to end users?

VP: What managed services might Accanto provide to some providers, to quicken their time to market?
MC: Thanks to the OSS expertise we inherited from the LTE Group, we are able to provide a series of professional services. They range from one-shot consultancy activities (such as auditing for network and operator's process optimisation) to fully-managed services that may focus on both monitoring and troubleshooting activities (and also act as second-level technical support for critical issues) as well as monitoring the quality of the services over long periods. Periodical reports can be tailored to the needs of different departments such as Marketing, NOC, Customer Care, etc. All this allows the operator to concentrate on Sales and Marketing as well as the service deployment, and leave the hard and time-consuming stuff to us. In the meantime, we look forward to these challenges.

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