



Mobile Wireless Multimedia in Cable's Future

It's coming, whether MSOs are ready or not.

Peter D. Shapiro

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I've seen the future, and it is mobile wireless multimedia. It is wireless messaging, video, voice, transactions and social networking. It is manifest on feature phones, smartphones, iPhones, MIDs (mobile Internet devices) and other mobile devices yet to be invented.

At the recent Mobile Internet World event in Boston, numerous ventures described their solutions for mobile wireless content providers, operators, advertisers and users. Also there, telling how they would enable all this to happen, were established platform and network providers such as Intel, Verizon Wireless, Sprint, Google and T-Mobile. I met with several interesting emerging and new companies to learn more about their technologies and business models:

- **Vantrix** (Montreal) provides a media processing gateway that enables content providers and distributors to transcode and stream multimedia and video content on the fly for optimal viewing on different devices. For mobile wireless multimedia, transmissions are optimized dynamically depending on each user's device profile and ever-changing wireless network conditions.
- **Azuki Systems** (Acton, Mass.) employs a Web-based software-as-a-service (SaaS) platform to enable interactive mobile media services with embedded targeted ads and personalized content. Online content is reformatted as shorter snackable units for display on mobile device screens. Users can zoom into tiled representations of the segments of greatest interest, add comments and share selected segments with others via a text message or posting to a Facebook newsfeed.
- **MetaCarta** (Cambridge, Mass.) is exploring mobile wireless applications for its geo-mapping technology now used by government and commercial customers to link content and messages with geographic locations. Based on geographic references in the content, the MetaCarta technology can place documents, messages and/or items mentioned in the content at latitude/longitude coordinates on any map, for display on any fixed or mobile wireless screen.

Not every start-up will succeed, and many challenges remain. However, as wireless operators expand coverage of their 3G and 4G high-data-rate networks, a transformation will occur in mobile wireless similar to that which occurred in the online world when broadband Internet access took hold. Compare, for example, the multimedia online services that we now take for granted versus the pallid text and graphics of the dial-up Internet of yesteryear.

What does all this signify for cable MSOs? Extending into mobile wireless multimedia would be a good fit for MSOs—the original multi-play service providers with their substantial programming assets and over 60 million customers for video, broadband Internet access and/or phone services. And, in the neighboring online space, Comcast in particular is gradually accumulating a significant presence both as an infrastructure provider and through acquisition of destination websites.

Unfortunately, the missing ingredient is a comprehensive cable strategy for mobile wireless. AWS (Advanced Wireless Service) spectrum purchased by MSOs in 2006 is not being used. MSOs involved in the prospective Sprint/Clearwire venture apparently envision using its WiMax 4G network primarily for wireless extensions of their fixed Internet access services. However, for wireless voice, which is crucial for competitiveness with incumbent wireless operators, it appears that they will be limited to distributing Sprint's service. Cox Communications is the only MSO that has announced plans to offer facilities-based wireless voice and data; although initially Cox will offer mobile wireless as an MVNO using Sprint's PCS network, in certain Cox cable service areas it will also build out 700 MHz spectrum acquired at the FCC auction earlier this year.

Meanwhile AT&T Wireless and Verizon Wireless have effectively taken over their telco parents. As a result, cable's most strategic competitors are now much better positioned to introduce integrated mobile/fixed services that will challenge cable's fixed-only products.

In the realm of advertising—one of cable's top priorities—mobile wireless multimedia is the next new frontier. Despite the obstacles—tiny screens, user impatience, wireless carrier toll-takers—methods will be found to monetize the real estate on ubiquitous mobile devices, thereby diverting ad dollars from existing media, including cable. As with online advertising, mobile wireless ads will be highly targeted. Like cable ads, they will be location-

aware, sometimes even more so, since mobile devices' locations are both constantly changing and constantly tracked.

In short, mobile wireless multimedia is in cable's future, one way or another.

Peter D. Shapiro is founder and principal at PDS Consulting, a cable & telecoms consultancy (www.pdsconsulting.net). He can be reached at: peter@pdsconsulting.net.

