

View from the Top: Wireless leaders

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What happens when you gather a group of senior executives from the largest wireless carriers today in one forum? The answer may surprise you. Although they compete to the death in the marketplace, when it comes to the challenges of new applications, emerging standards and a never-ending stream of mergers and acquisitions, they have a whole lot in common.

In late October the Wireless Communications Association International (WCA) created just such a tête-à-tête in a hotel ballroom in Reston, Va., the heart of the famed Northern Virginia Technology Corridor. Within those four walls, executive-level business leaders and technologists debated, discussed and dissected the top-line issues of the wireless broadband world -- rich media, simplicity of technology, standards independence and the totally wireless broadband network.

"Rich media" is the market moniker for today's wireless broadband applications. Consumers and business increasingly demand a "third screen" via a cell phone or PDA that supports high-bandwidth applications such as mobile work environments, music and video downloads and gaming, a heavy-user wireless segment. Driving this thirst for rich media are increasingly available "juiced-up" PDA devices and new mobile chipsets that are enabling the proliferation of smaller and more powerful laptops.

The WCA group grappled with the universal industry challenge to transform their wireless networks to deliver these critical Internet Protocol applications, while retaining all the current applications that

their customers depend on for their increasingly important wireless service. Multiple technologies are an often complicated reality for any network today, where offering legacy services along with emerging applications creates a complex environment for carriers in their overall network management.

One increasingly important mobile application, of course, is public safety and first-responder communications, particularly with new federal requirements for diversity and redundancy. The tragedy of Sept. 11 and the Katrina and Rita natural disasters have served to remind the nation painfully of the importance of communication within the family, community and government when crisis occurs. The Bush administration task force is driving the need for wireless service in-building and at the disposal of key agencies for security and disaster recovery.

One executive from the group highlighted a WiMax "plug and play" wireless solution that quickly and effectively enabled Mobile Disaster units, Mobile Hospice centers and Internet-on-Wheels solutions in support of FEMA's relief efforts in New Orleans and other affected centers ravaged by Katrina. The group strongly agreed that simplicity of technology and ease of use for consumers is increasingly important, and not just in times of crisis. The industry needs fewer truck rolls and more self-serve consumer installation to drive critical mass in order to scale its costs.

On the international front, one European carrier unveiled the timetable for the launch of IPTV that will bundle both "Broadcast" channels along with "Unicast" applications in an IP environment. The Korean market is now characterized with higher rate of SMS traffic -- short messaging -- than overall traditional voice traffic. Service "bundles" are being offered to include ringtones, MP3 downloads and video services in order to retain the increasingly sophisticated Korean consumer -- one of the most advanced mobile markets in the world.

This wireless-centric gathering highlighted the market need for pure wireless network solutions with less dependence on traditional wireline networks for call completion. European networks today are 70 percent wireless for "backhaul" solutions. In contrast, the U.S. market is 90 percent landline or terrestrials for backhaul applications. Wireless alternatives, including satellite solutions, are certain to lower costs in an increasingly cost-competitive market. As the cost of purchasing and building out spectrum rises, lowering carrier costs with wireless backhaul and call completion is an industry imperative for overall market growth.

All in all, every executive and technologist agreed that it is an incredibly important time for our industry. Wireless broadband is a reality, not a concept, and convergence is driving both costs and opportunities for all carriers as they try to navigate through the challenges of an increasingly IP-enabled world.

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