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Promise of Things to Come: What's New with the TM Forum

by Tim Young

As coverage elsewhere in this issue illustrates very clearly, there's no shortage of entries on the events calendar of any telecom executive. The fall is fairly crowded with trade shows and summits. Even on such a crowded field, however, an event like TMW-Dallas is worth a second glance. The event marks the celebration of ten years of TMW, and sports a new name. While previous events have been known as "TeleManagement World," or simply "TMW," this year's Dallas event is called "TMForum Management World," or.... "TMW."

In addition to having the foresight to retain a common acronym, the show creators have endeavored to put together a show worthy of approaching a new decade full of challenges and possibilities. I took some time to speak to Martin Creaner, President and CTO of the TMForum, and he shed some light on the changes that the show has experienced, as well as the state of the Forum.

What's in a Name?

With regards to the change in name, some are interested to see if there will be a change in focus as well. Creaner replies that it's "maybe not as broad as a shift in focus. There has been a change in the way the market is moving." Indeed, there has been a sizable change in the market niche addressed by TMW and the telecommunications market as a whole. Creaner asserts that content and device providers entering the market are doing so with gusto, and while major telecom players like BT, AT&T, or Deutsche Telekom are not in danger of vanishing with any immediacy, they are being joined by other companies that are entering the space. "The telecoms world is going to be unrecognizable in a few years time with all the additional players that are getting involved," Creaner said. "There are a whole lot of other players that are edging into the box. Quite frankly, know one really knows how any of that is going to work out."

So who are these players and what is their game? According to Creaner, TMW is shifting to accommodate "content and device companies. Disney, for example, wants to engage in telephony services, not only through its VNO type offerings, but also through directly delivering its content to consumers over the air." Content companies, however, aren't alone in their expanding role. "Companies like Apple on the device side have obviously been making a huge splash, and there's about to be the G-Phone (from Google) coming along as well." These new entrants into the

space necessitated an upgrade to the format of the show to allow problems to be addressed directly and fully. "The big question hanging over the whole industry is when all of these new players appear, when all of this change happens, who will be left standing? What will the value chains look like? That was the mindset we had for putting together a management world show for Dallas. "

In order to tackle the changing face of the marketplace, TMW-Dallas, will be packed with programs to address the needs of the new players, as well as the traditional TMW attendee. "There will be a lot of presentations from content players," Creaner said. "There will be a lot of presentations on the management challenges of content switches, digital rights management, fingerprinting and so on. There will be a range of discussions on how you might migrate from one business to another. There will be a lot of discussion of service delivery platforms."



Cable-Ready

In addition to expanding reach to newcomers like content and device companies, the TMW is doing more to attract and retain cable companies as members. Cable companies are, according to Creaner, "only a baby step away from telecom companies. It's more historical difference on where the original focus was and, if you talk to the companies, something of a philosophical difference, but there isn't much of a difference in business models anymore." The forum has seen quite a growth in the numbers of cable companies joining the forum, adding companies like Cox, Comcast, UPC, and TimeWarner to its ranks. "They've been joining," Creaner said, "because, though the telecoms industry may be behind the cable in some respects, particularly in delivery of content, it's considered to be ahead in terms of management." The Forum has set up a cable interest group to focus on the needs of the cablecos and combines those new challenges with the management challenges that the TM Forum is already well-versed in solving in an effort to deliver comprehensive solutions to all those involved, regardless of access technology.

Content is Key

In the past, one of the programs that the Forum was ceaselessly championing was NGOSS. What's the status of NGOSS as the show grows? The NGOSS programs were, in the eyes of Creaner, "an effort to define the fundamental, basic

frameworks for how to solve basic OSS/BSS problems.” The verdict? “Essentially, we’ve succeeded in doing that. It seems to be widely accepted by the industry.” The TM Forum’s NGOSS architecture, the NGOSS Business Process Framework (eTOM), the NGOSS Information Framework (SID), NGOSS Application Framework (TAM) are, in the eyes of Creaner, “very mature, very stable, and widely adopted frameworks. We have literally hundreds of case studies.” So where does that leave NGOSS? “NGOSS becomes the background. The wallpaper. It’s like you don’t talk too much, here in the UK, about the 220 volt outlet. It’s presupposed. We talk less about NGOSS explicitly because it’s almost present implicitly in every conversation. There are four tracks talking about NGOSS solutions. There are multiple presentations on NGOSS.”

Aside from talk of NGOSS, the catalyst showcases are always a highlight of the TMW shows. The ability to see and experience the work done by the catalyst workgroups is always an interesting way to see in action new technologies that could otherwise be faceless and nebulous. Along those same lines, one thing that this TMW Dallas show will feature, in order to better serve both the content companies that are increasingly involved with the TM Forum and the service providers who are constantly endeavoring to embrace new and different content challenges is something they’ve dubbed the “Content Encounter.” It’s “meant to be an immersive experience through six different scenarios relating to mobility or user-interaction community building services,” explained Creaner. “You’ll get a feeling for not only the use cases that service providers genuinely believe will be relevant in the future, but also the back-office challenges to providing those services.”



Infinite Resource

On top of the expanded role of content, device, and cable companies, the TM Forum also has the added facet of having included the Global Billing Association (GBA) and the IPDR (Internet Protocol Detail Record Organization) under its umbrella. The announcement was made at TMW-Nice, so this will be the first show with the other groups in the fold. These aspects cannot help but beg the question: Is the TM Forum spreading itself too thin?

“It’s a question I ask regularly,” Creaner said with a laugh. “Our Chairman, Keith Willets, talks about something he calls the infinite resource model. The way the TM

Forum makes progress in work areas is by using seconded resources from the member companies. Members typically will deliver resources on areas that are important to them, and they generally see it as being pretty good value for money." Generally, it seems that once member companies are committed to at least one project, additional projects are a much easier sell. "If the TM Forum is doing ten technical activities, and that happens to be of interest to a hundred different vendors or service providers, we'll get a certain amount of resources," said Creaner. "We might get a hundred people seconded into the TM Forum to help us drive those activities. If we decide to do an extra five or ten activities above that, the chances are that either the same service providers and vendors will provide us additional resource or we'll have hit on a hot topic for some of the newer service providers and vendors." Since the resources are largely supplied by the companies who are doing the research and gaining valuable and often marketable knowledge, the TM Forum welcomes additional projects. "Fundamentally, what we see is that the only risk we run in terms of spreading ourselves too thinly," Creaner said "is a focus risk."

In fact, Creaner sees the expansion of focus not as a danger, but as a necessity. "Certainly the TM Forum's ambition is to be the one-stop shop for the management issues in the telecoms industry. However wide the telecoms industry becomes, and however many different places the management challenges emerge, the TM Forum has to be there." With that philosophy in mind, the added focus of cable, device, and content providers is a welcome addition and yet another milestone in the growth of the forum.

Speaking of Milestones...

The TM Forum has celebrated a few big moments lately. First of all, Russian mobile carrier MegaFon has become the forum's 600th member. In addition, as mentioned previously, this show marks the tenth year of the show's existence, and the 20th TMW.

How will this show do in the face of its milestone status? The show is expected to be 20-30% larger than last year's, in terms of attendance. "It will be, by far, the largest OSS/BSS show in North America this year," said Creaner. "It's smaller than our Nice event, but it's still a large show. We'll probably have somewhere in the neighborhood of 70-80 exhibitors, so a show floor about the same size as the one in Nice. We'd run out of space on our original show floor, so we had to put on an additional show floor. It's going to be a significantly bigger expo than last year."

Bigger expo. More attendees. Specialized conference tracks for executives, cable, device management, digital rights management and other specialties. Speakers from Blackberry (RIM), Telus, TimeWarner, and others. Lots of options. So what is the limit to the TM Forum Management World? "We're not trying to solve problems that have been solved elsewhere. We take the end-to-end management challenge of how you knit all of this together." Through this focus on management wherever you find it and an ever-expanding umbrella, TMW may just make itself more and more relevant as the market continues to change, shift, and grow.

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