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Considerations for Your Next-Gen Billing RFP

Anita Karve
 12/29/2008

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But above and beyond creating accurate invoices, Ajmera says another key consideration for providers evaluating billing systems is if the platform can give them a single view of the customer. "If you have that, you can more easily cross-sell and upsell into other products in your portfolio that the customer may not be taking advantage of," he said.

OUTLOOK: As for 2009, Ajmera says the challenge for providers is how much they are willing to spend on what. Large capital investment hard for many companies to even think about now.

Jeff Cotrupe, Founder and CEO at MarketPOWER LLC

Top RFP Considerations

- Ability to Bill at Different Rates based on Packet Type to Differentiate Services
- Support for a Wide Range of Next-Generation Services
- Integration with a Service Delivery Platform
- Integration with a Revenue Operations Center

A next-generation billing system needs to support the creation of a wide range of billing parameters that map to new service models and customer agreements, according to Jeff Cotrupe, founder and CEO of MarketPower LLC. This encompasses the ability to bill each packet at a different rate based on packet type to differentiate between services. Some of these services include VoIP, text or multimedia messaging, IPTV, gaming, location-based services and unified/intelligent communications.



Cotrupe adds to this list a new class of services that are delivered by emerging service delivery platforms (SDPs), such as MVNO networks and branded storefronts.

Other features he adds to the list of things providers should consider in billing platforms are multiple customer tiers; value-based, volume-based or flat-rate block pricing; prepaid and postpaid service plans; support for global currencies; and carrier-to-carrier settlement.

One of the questions Cotrupe advises providers to ask their vendors is if their billing systems are part of or integrated with an SDP. "An SDP slashes the time, cost and risk of introducing and integrating new services, he said. "It enables rapid development and deployment of everything from traditional voice to complex multimedia applications to services that don't even exist yet."

He adds that an SDP provides an infrastructure for users to manage and pay for services, and for content providers to deliver those services, get paid for them and pay the service provider. The advantage here is that it incorporates billing right into the service creation and delivery process.

Cotrupe also suggests asking vendors if their billing system is part of or integrated with a revenue operations center (ROC). "The ROC integrates all billing, revenue and cost management processes with each other, and then integrates them with the rest of an operator's OSS/BSS infrastructure," he said. "If there are revenue assurance holes — and there usually are — the ROC fills them up."

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In addition to ensuring revenue is not leaking, the ROC helps to stop customers from walking out the door, and winning them back if they do. "It can be a powerful part, maybe the most valuable input, to carrier marketing operations and initiatives," he said. "It also brings together the data necessary to support correction and prevention of both underbilling and overbilling, as well as reconciliation of off-network costs."

OUTLOOK: In today's lackluster economy, Cotrupe says consumers are running short on discretionary income, and businesses are looking for ways to cut non-essential expenditures, and value-added services could be early casualties. "Carriers shouldn't be looking to cover the full cost of the SDP with the first value-added services rollout; they should be thinking in terms of entry/introductory/early adopter pricing to make sure these new services get a foothold in the market," he said.

Salahuddin Khawaja, Senior Manager at Deloitte

Top RFP Considerations

- Overall Cost of the New Solution
- Functionality
- Reporting and Dashboarding
- User Experience
- Overall Security and Compliance

One of the top considerations in an RFP for a next-generation billing system is cost, according to Salahuddin Khawaja, senior manager at Deloitte. Companies transitioning to a new billing platform need to know the real costs of doing that transition, but also have to take into account the costs of operating the new billing system over a period of 10 years versus the old system in order to know the true total cost of ownership, he says.

Another key area is functionality, particularly around customization. "They should know how out-of-the-box the solution itself is, and if it's going to require massive customization in order to meet their customers' needs," he said. "If that's the case, people are generally avoiding that kind of situation." A good billing solution needs to have mediation, rating and invoicing right out of the box no matter what, he adds.

Khawaja says the other aspect of functionality involves business rules, which involves a billing system being able to keep up with a client's business as it changes and evolves over time. But he goes further and points out that many providers haven't even set up a solid RFP framework in the first place, which can lead to numerous problems. "If you ask the right questions, you'll get the answers you want; but if you don't spend serious time on an RFP, you'll get a mishmash of responses and won't be able to do a good vendor evaluation," he said. "The more advance work you do, the easier it is not only to do the vendor selection but to pick the right vendor."

OUTLOOK: Although it's difficult to forecast the future, especially during trying economic times, Khawaja says that any projects going forward will be concerned largely with and based around cost. "If someone is looking at replacing a billing platform or system, they are going to be asking what it'll do to their bottom line," he said. "If the business owner of a billing software solution wants to get a particular project done, a six-month lead time is no longer acceptable. But if the software is nimble, doesn't require core changes and is driven by business rules, I think that's going to become more valuable in the near term."

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