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And that's not the same thing as 'seamless connectivity'

by Troy Simoni

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The wi-fi user experience must improve if our on-the-road connectivity needs are to be met fully, says Troy Simoni. And with technologies such as WiMax on the way, the time to act is now.

It's so painful watching contestants being grilled by Anne Robinson on *The Weakest Link* that you wonder why it has become such a hit show. The so-called Queen of Mean pulls no punches with her patronising and caustic put-downs. And frankly it's still painful getting public wireless broadband connections such that the user experience could very much be seen as the weakest link in the whole wi-fi access game.

While wi-fi developments have been considerable - more enabled devices, the creation of wireless cities, extensive international wi-fi roaming - the Achilles heel is still the complicated, lengthy login process when accessing public hotspots coupled with restrictive pricing models.

While it's straightforward to log in on a hotspot where you have your own account, the problems start when you want to log in at hotspots operated by other companies either in the UK or abroad. Or when using different devices (without keyboards) or applications such as VoIP, gaming and video.

A strong user experience, in contrast, is something that enables users to want to use something, allows them to do so easily and that in turn unlocks a massive business opportunity with sustainable profit margins.

You don't have to look far for commercial examples. The PalmPilot made managing one's diary, tasks and contacts simple compared to the devices that preceded it. The BlackBerry did the same with mobile email. Email is pushed to you automatically in contrast to other solutions where you have to synchronise to get messages. Both have been runaway successes.

Similarly, MP3 players had been around for years before the arrival of Apple's iPod. At the time, manufacturers were fixated on designing devices to be smaller and cheaper while including extensive features and storage.

But nobody was able to make that business work until Apple improved the user experience and made it simple. It launched a product that has been more successful than anything else. Why? Apple focused on how consumers would get music on and off their devices and how they could create song lists by coupling the iPod with iTunes.

And the price of the actual device or service actually becomes less relevant. While there are cheaper alternatives to iPods, BlackBerrys and Palms, consumers have been prepared to ignore price and pay more for them because they are user-friendly.

So what's the answer? How do you make the wi-fi user experience strong not weak?. Over the years there has been talk about seamless connectivity being the answer to make all the problems go away. Not so, in my view.

There are times when you want to control when you connect. Imagine going to a petrol station and filling up your car without knowing how much you'll end up paying and the bill just following. Of course you want to see the price beforehand. It is the same with wi-fi, especially if you are roaming internationally and don't want to connect because of cost. There must be intelligence with connectivity which is understandable and rational to the user.

Equally, the wi-fi industry has to move away from copying mobile phone pricing models. People ought to be thinking about the application the consumer is trying to use and on what device - and then price accordingly. This is important as more and more products come with wi-fi built-in.



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Take wi-fi enabled cameras which allow users to upload pictures to storage sites. Currently this is charged based on the time it takes to upload files. It doesn't make sense. Should operators actually charge like this and potentially have disgruntled customers because the network is so slow that it costs more to do so? No, you have to charge based on the application - in other words, paying to upload per picture or using a subscription approach.

The same with mobile VoIP calls. Currently if you log a wi-fi enabled phone on to a network you pay even if a call hasn't been made which is counter intuitive - operators need to change this before such services take off.

The problems that need to be addressed to make the user experience better while opening up the market fall into various categories:

1. Devices must be able to automatically authenticate when users want and not when they don't. In other words, semi-automated authentication is needed.
2. Presence capabilities must be added for instant messaging, gaming and VoIP. You want to know the other party is there before you pay to be online. There has to be the ability to send a signal to say I am here (similar to the mobile phone) and pricing models must change to facilitate this.
3. Window shopping opportunities must be added. For example, you may want to browse different videos online before buying one. Again, it doesn't make sense to pay to do so. It would be like a department store shutting up its windows and saying you can't look in, pay to come inside first and then you can.

This is what it is like today. Users cannot get wi-fi access unless they start paying. There have to be different commercial models which start with the consumer and the application and include metering capabilities to measure and bill against this. And with all these different applications on different networks, what we can't afford to have is everyone doing their own thing, otherwise we'll have a million different solutions to the problem resulting in no solutions at all.

The industry has to work together and make some compromises because the opportunity is too large for any one company to have a specific intractable agenda. This is particularly the case with national carriers which traditionally dominate markets and want to do things in their own way. And there is, in my view, a real imperative regarding this especially as **WiMax services** are looming. We need to get things right with wi-fi if the opportunity presented by WiMax is to be realised, given that market is expected to be larger.

A strong user experience will be driven by the application and is about creating intelligent semi-automated connections with intelligent pricing which makes the user experience so simple that they are willing to pay for it. In this way, we'll be able to do what Anne Robinson does on her show and say goodbye to the weakest link dragging things down.

Troy Simoni is the founder and CEO of Quiconnect.

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