



"Wireless needn't be whiffy if telcos work together to make usage easier"

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Troy Simoni, Chief Executive Officer, Quiconnect

During a visit to Grenoble recently, it was amusing to overhear a French colleague pronounce Wi-Fi as 'whiffy'. Irrespective of the verbal faux-pas, the comment does reflect what has actually happened with public Wi-Fi access - the state of affairs has been somewhat 'whiffy'.

Wi-Fi at home or work is relatively easy to use, but the problem with public Wi-Fi access is that network operators and carriers have inadvertently added complexity. Issues arise because each Wi-Fi location is visually different along with different log in processes - scratch card, credit card, having to remember passwords or the need for the user to know that his ISP has a roaming agreement with a particular third party aggregator. People just don't want the hassle. They just want to get connected fast, without fooling around with settings or having to be some sort of techno whiz kid.

To date, most 'hotspot' usage has involved people trying to access data related applications but with the huge growth in VoIP, the lack of simplicity is a serious issue. In a wireless environment, voice needs different billing requirements and has to be even easier to get a connection.

The driving force behind VoIP growth is that it is so much less expensive than cellular - you can call anywhere in the world without incurring long distance call or roaming charges, plus a whole host of 'new' features will be offered which supersede the traditional cellular handset. For example, you'll have one number which will ring simultaneously on your work, home or mobile phone. In addition, you'll be able to set up numerous local numbers globally (taking advantage of local call rates) which all feed into the one handset - it's the separation of your telephone number from where you physically access it.

Meanwhile the telco industry is getting caught up debating about the seamless 'handoffs' between Wi-Fi and GSM, with cellular operators promoting UMA (universal mobile access) technology to retain control of their existing GSM-based customers.

This is a distraction because in the next 10 years, many telcos will go out of business (through consolidation) as VoIP becomes the foundation for all telephony. All telcos will become worldwide because VoIP is a global technology. Your handset will be Wi-Fi and eventually WiMAX based, with GSM acting simply as a back up. And this is happening now.

If access to public Wi-Fi were easier and a system established similar to the banks where cash machines can be accessed by all - the Cirrus or Maestro approach - usage for data and voice would increase far faster with obvious benefits.

To make all this happen, you have to tie the networks together so that your mobile IP-based devices – PDAs, laptops, mobiles and so on - can seamlessly log onto the different types of IP networks around the world.

The expertise and technology is here today to do this but the telco community needs to rapidly make connectivity far simpler. A new initiative (championed by my organisation) called virtual network enablement means easy user log in, streamlined authentication and billing management, achieving what Cirrus and Maestro did for the Banks - a simple way of connecting everyone. Then quality services accessing data and voice can be truly delivered without, to quote my French compatriot again, things being a 'whiffy' reality.

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