Jon Doyle of CommuniGate Systems explains how the company can help telcos turn the new iPhone into the ultimate mobile office

New iPhone delivers promise of software as a service

Jon Doyle: telephony levels of robustness and service quality

Apple's iPhone 2.0 will usher in a new era for small and medium sized business communications by enabling full calendar and personal information management synchronisation across a reliable platform not dependent on Microsoft.

The arrival of iPhone 2.0 is highly timely for service providers, since it provides a great opportunity to generate additional revenues through SaaS — or software as a service — when mobile voice revenues are seemingly in terminal decline.

Three key ingredients are making this possible. Firstly the second iPhone supports 3G, which is crucial for the European market where lack of it in the first version held back sales dramatically compared to the US.

Secondly the iPhone incorporates over the air AirSync technology. This for the first time delivers full calendar synchronisation in addition to the email functions already familiar on existing devices — notably the RIM BlackBerry.

The third component to make all this sing is the availability of a robust and reliable unified communications platform from CommuniGate Systems, enabling users to manage all their email, calendaring, voice over IP and PIM via a single, light and flexible web 2.0 client called Pronto!

These three components combined with the iPhone itself comprise a very powerful proposition for operators to serve up to their SMB customers, whether they use Windows, Mac or Linux on the desktop.

For the first time operators can present these customers with a mobile device that truly is a mobile extension of their office. The potential productivity gains through being able to schedule diaries and calendars as well as email from a single mobile device are enormous.

Although the first iPhone launched in June 2007 lacked 3G capabilities, it has already established its credentials as a device capable of generating huge revenues on the data side. While sales in Europe have been relatively modest, it has spawned huge take up of data ARPU.

In Germany for example just 100,000 iPhones have been sold in the year since its launch, and yet it has boosted the data traffic of T-Mobile, the exclusive distributor there, by 30 times. Such a rate of increase is unprecedented in the mobile data arena.

On that basis, operators must indeed be eagerly awaiting iPhone 2.0, for with 3G along with an array of alluring cool features, it will have a much stronger appeal in Europe, matching or even exceeding the success of iPhone 1.0 in the US, where one million sold in the first 74 days.

Furthermore this appeal straddles the business and consumer market, making it the first truly hybrid device in this sense.

The BlackBerry took the corporate market by storm by virtue of its simplicity and email capability, but was too clunky and dull for the youth market. The iPhone, however, has already shown its youth appeal and the second version will gain further ground with features such as geotagging, which will enable photographs to be labelled with both the date and place they were taken.

But the business side is equally exciting for operators, who will be able to promote a highly robust platform likely to appeal to the growing number of customers disillusioned with Microsoft Exchange reliability and operational plagues.

The problem there is not so much lack of features, but the continuing difficulty of delivering anything approaching "five nines" availability. This did not matter so much when Exchange was largely just an office platform, but in the era of unified communications, users expect exactly the same levels of availability as they have long obtained from their telephone service.

This is where the CommuniGate Pro platform really comes into its own. This platform exceeds five nines availability, equating to less than five minutes downtime a year. The reason is simple enough: the solution is one solid and integrated platform.

CommuniGate has always aimed for telephony levels of robustness and service quality, to the extent that every new feature we add is thoroughly tested firstly in isolation and then deployed with the whole to ensure that it meets our exacting standards.

All our software development staff work directly for us, and we have resisted what we consider the false economy of outsourcing, especially offshore. This is not of course because software professionals in other countries are inferior, but because we consider that the highest level of quality and robustness can only be achieved through in-house project management.

When development is distributed across different parts of the world, it becomes very difficult to keep control over source code, and over time maintenance and upgrades become both more expensive and more likely to introduce bugs or inconsistencies.

It might seem strange in this context to stress the importance of well-managed software development, but this really does make the difference between a robust and a flaky platform. Yet of course good software on its own does not lead to success in the mobile communications arena, unless there are also devices that will appeal to our customers.

That is why we at CommuniGate Systems are so excited by the potential of iPhone 2.0 to galvanise the SMB portable device market in conjunction with our platform. ■