

# PORTALS: THE AGE OF ENGAGEMENT

Portals are beginning to become very important. End users are starting to expect self-service for a range of goods and services so why not communications products and services.

**A**t the back end of 2014 we decided that we would over the next 12 months take a close look at supplier portals. There were many reasons for this. Firstly we were at the time witnessing a huge growth in the development of on-line provisioning and service portals. It not only seemed that everyone suddenly had one but also everyone was claiming their portal was the best on the planet.

Whilst this turn of events certainly piqued our interest we were at the same time recognising that the concept of 'self-service' as a channel/user deliverable was not only gaining traction but was also garnering support from analysts who saw the move as being essential in this 'Age of Engagement'.

The year started well; we had a list of some 30 firms that had 'world class' portals and we began our own engagement with them by examining two companies that were shouting the loudest - Virtual1 and ICUK.

There was a lot these two portals had in common - not least was the fact that both had been developed in house. The reviews were published in our January and March issues.

There are three aspects that are key for us in any portal review:

1. It has to be easy to use.
2. It has to be 'joined up'. What we mean here is - say a portal from the same firm that handles mobiles comms but not connectivity, you don't want to hear, 'Oh yeah, you have to go to our other portal for that', is less than useful. At the end of the portal session a reseller wants one page to click on to get his complete quote and set of options. The worst example I've seen was three portals required to get to that point.

3. It has to be FAST!

Virtual1's 1Portal was

first up and was as impressive as Tom O'Hagan had promised.

We wrote at the time, 'There's no doubt the portal is fast! The demonstration I went through showed quotes and pricing being put together incredibly fast and users are presented with a choice of circuits from all the carriers Virtual1 partners with. Options for users are too numerous to list but suffice to say you can order the results displayed in almost every and any combination. You can even omit suppliers if you are not keen on using their products.'

Virtual1 ticked all the boxes as did our second review, that of ICUK. Equally as impressive the ICUK portal was super fast too. Managing Director Paul Barnett decided to put together his own portal in 2001 when he concluded those available at the time were not up to the job.

The 15 years experience shows as we noted that 'in a nutshell the portal takes you through the process of creating a quote, viewing and placing the order and then managing that order or service once it goes live.

Suffice to say without going in to

all the detail you can do all that in an instant. Neat features I noticed along the way were tariff, speed, and supplier selection, press go and the quote is there. It's fast. Very, very fast. In fact the fastest we have seen.'

It was fair to say that both of these portals ticked all the boxes.

And there we hit the buffers. Suddenly, after publishing these two reviews, everyone else seemed to go shy on us until recently when VanillaIP and Gamma called up and said could I have a look at theirs. To be fair to both, when I contacted them earlier both said they had big portal developments due and could I wait till they were released.

What impressed me straight away was that the VanillaIP demo was done remotely but live (Team Viewer) - I made entries myself to make sure it was kosher.

The VanillaIP Uboss portal was a good-looking multi-level cloud based system that manages all elements of a partner's cloud and traditional portfolio. The portal is fully brandable with the option to add any types of services in on the fly, so making sure the client does not have any misunderstanding of who is providing the services to them.

Uboss fully manages the whole fulfilment and provisioning process, as an example for the review I was shown within five minutes of building a new Hosted IP user along with ordering an additional WLR3 analogue line all from the same portal using the same logic. Uboss allows every element to be included from placing the order for the phones with the reseller's chosen vendor to adding phone numbers and billing the user using a simple 4-step wizard to fully updating the billing module which means the customer has a working phone instantly. The reseller does not have any extra steps to

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Customer service and loyalty can be built with portals that work for users.



Self service as a concept is spreading across many sectors and comms is no exception

ensure all elements including service, hardware and calls will automatically be included on the next invoice without any further work.

There's easy access to change and update user services including a nice touch where when a user hovers over optional service the pricing is automatically shown - user and business administrators can add services on demand and they are instantly available.

The Business Intelligence and Reporting comes across in many elements of Uboss from being able to see in real time orders placed, services added, notification of client downloading their tariff tables (handy for the sales team to give them a call to make sure all is OK), to the more traditional demands to view call logger reports with calls fully rated and updated within 15 minutes of the call being completed. With 13 months of call data available you can easily access the call recordings all from within the portal.

### Just the Ticket

Uboss also has a powerful messaging module that allows the partner and their client to issue, track and report on tickets. For the time consuming need of having to tell customers of an on-going issue the notification module worked well - it allows the reseller to send out a notification in seconds to all clients that have a particular service. This is a smart feature and means not having to blast the whole customer base when sending out what could be seen as a negative message.

The fraud protection was exactly as it says; daily credit limits are automatically implemented - I am informed £15.00 is typical for most users and £125.00 per business - and when the user gets to 80% of the limit

an email is sent and at 100% the phone is automatically call barred. I am told that Uboss now rates 'In-Flight' CDR's to remove the risk of long duration calls. In our review of portals we did not see any other system that was this effective in dealing with the big issue for many resellers of toll fraud.

Uboss has a fully integrated billing module. Billing in Uboss is not in itself a major event because all transactions are being completed in real time with single data entry. The bill run, so typically the bane of many reseller's lives, is just sent out automatically on the 1st of the month. For resellers that are using 3rd party billing systems Uboss allows export of all CDR and SDR (event) data.

The Uboss portal is certainly impressive and the company has just received ISO 27001 accreditation across their entire portfolio including Uboss.

The Gamma Portal demo was also remote and live but used WebEx which my Mac did not like using with its native Safari browser but a switch to Chrome soon sorted that out.

The first thing to say is that Gamma has two portals which breaks one of my three key rules but they had a good reason for this. The Gamma provisioning portal is restricted to reseller only access whereas the Horizon portal can be used by resellers and end users. In essence the Horizon portal is more akin to PBX feature and services programming of old.

Both work really well and have in depth feature sets but focussing on the reseller portal there were a great number of nifty and very useful features. My favourite was the in context web chat. No matter that you have been on a portal training course there are always going to be times when you are not sure which button to

## PORTAL HIGHLIGHTS

### 1Portal Top Five Features:

1. Over 1500 individual portal users
2. Several hundred partner users
3. Over two and a half thousand quotes a month (including those for MPLS pricing, saved and archived)
4. Over 100 Internet orders a month via the portal
5. Monthly face to face and online training for new and existing partners

### ICUK Top Five Features

1. Very Fast
2. Leased line provisioning
3. Customer end user controls
4. Broadband Diagnostics
5. On-line order tracking

### Uboss Top Five Features

1. Easy drill down to any level, user, service etc.
2. The end user client has the same view as the reseller - just with fewer options
3. Portal fully permission and roles based with an audit trail of all transactions placed
4. All available from a standard Browser with no VPN's required
5. Fraud Detection and Customer Notification Centre - smart features

### Gamma Top Five Features

1. Fault Finding 'Journeys'
2. Near Live Changes - effective in 5-10 minutes
3. Tasks and works completed before equipment delivery
4. Contextual chat sessions - a great get out of jail card
5. Live porting of numbers and number availability look up

press or what will happen if you press the wrong one. With services going live and billing engines firing up with equal speed you could easily end up in a mess so whatever you are doing at the time the Web Chat button will find you someone in Gamma that can see what you are doing and guide you through the process.

The other feature I liked was a 'Journey Planner'. Again if you want to trouble shoot a situation or service issue the portal will walk you through the observations and options you can check on line before the need arises to call in.

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Portals can play a useful role in limited phone fraud and bill shock.



If I make it sound that the portal is complicated then let me assure you it's not. Gamma has just belt and braced it.

### Reseller Comments

Jon Lamont, Services Manager at 01 Telecom, says that Uboss runs their entire service provisioning and device configuration.

"But that's only about 20% of its value. I would not even describe it as primarily a provisioning system, it is more a management platform with automated billing built in. We run all our third party service, such as leased lines, through Uboss. The customer does not know which services are coming from which providers, including VanillaIP. It's not even possible to tell what's a BroadSoft service and what's not. Everything is unified as an 01 Telecom product under our own logo."

Vicki Rishbeth, Operations Director at Focus Group, told us, "The new Health Check tools for Horizon and Gamma SIP Trunks have revolutionised the support experience we are giving here at Focus Group. Our teams can, at a glance, run through first line checks on our customers services which has increased our 'first touch' resolution with our customers and increased the customer satisfaction statistics here."

### Other Portals:

**Content Guru** The storm Provisioning Portal is an online software tool that allows Content Guru's reseller partners to: initiate orders and monitor their progress, create quotes for customers, set up billing packages, manage licences, book training, check emergency CLIs are set up for customer sites and manage orders.

The portal has an extensive range of billing options: enabling resellers to invoice customers for one-off charges (e.g. hardware and setup fees), monthly recurring charges (e.g. licences and hosting fees) and service usage. Reseller can choose to do their own billing, or use Content Guru's fully managed billing service.

**ProVu** ProVu's provisioning portal, ProSys provides resellers and Internet Service Providers (ITSP's) access to a selection of tools designed to reduce the costs of deploying hardware to their customers. The tools are split in to four sections; ordering, provisioning, management and integration. Developed in house, ProSys provisioning works across all the distributors leading brands of IP phones and has been running since 2004 and has provisioned 250,000 phones to date.

**Eclipse** The Eclipse Partner Portal is a one-stop-shop for placing orders, managing bills and accessing marketing resources. Eclipse says 'there's always room for improvement though and this year we added functionality for partners to suspend circuits. We also introduced a quick search, allowing partners to find circuits more quickly. Our Partner Portal UX project resulted in reducing the journey to customer details from seven clicks to one.

Another portal I saw first hand at the Convergence Summit in October was that of Entanet where they launched their new Mirada Portal.

The Mirada portal can help resellers to pro-actively manage and monitor their customers' IP VPN and PWAN networks. Through the

highly secure new portal customers can view useful real-time performance statistics, including capacity and status information, and see a dynamic visual topology of the network and every connection. Customers can also use the virtual machine feature and diagnostic tools to work alongside Entanet's own technical support and systems teams to proactively and efficiently diagnose and fix faults as and when they happen.

Bill Naylor, Office Manager at Lawyers Online Ltd, which has an extensive IP VPN, stated: "Mirada has proved itself an excellent addition to our support system. It saved support calls as soon as it went live and gives great visibility of the entire customer network. Being able to quickly identify upstream saturation at branch office sites has enabled us to manage expectations."

The portal has been developed in-house by Entanet's software development and NOC teams and will be reviewed and enhanced continually, based on customer feedback and industry developments.

### ED SAYS...

The Prime Minister has made a statement to the effect that broadband is now a commodity product that everyone should have access to. Whilst Dave is really referring to residential customers never the less B2B network providers must increasingly find ways of differentiating themselves by adding value and providing tools for their users to help themselves. A portal is just one way of achieving that goal. This is my question; is it worse to have no portal at all or to have a portal that is next to useless?



Ian Hunter