

Comms industry enters a

Supplier and reseller operations must be brought up to date if the comms industry's cogs are not to jam. But fear not – the rise of highly developed portals will ensure that the channel's wheels remain well greased for today and the times ahead.

The comms industry has in the past been guilty of creating ill-considered user interfaces that are, at best, clunky in terms of the flow of information, user interaction and user experience, believes Aled Treharne, Director of Innovation and Development at Siphon (part of the Nuvias Group). "As an industry, our benchmark should have been higher," he stated. "We're providing communications systems, so communicating with customers should come easily to us. The onus is on us to deliver new ways of communicating with end users."

Putting words into action Siphon has developed Dovetail, a new portal to help customers deploy and manage CPE, which is scheduled to launch in Q1 2017. "We took the decision to build our own system," said Treharne. "The biggest change is a different approach around the data model. Dovetail has been designed to have a multi-tier channel model at its core and we've made it flexible enough to fit any business model. Couple that with the white label functionality, which allows our channel partners to present a branded interface of their choosing, and Dovetail represents a significant shift for us in the distribution market."

There are two key factors motivating Siphon's focus



Aled Treharne

on software development – commercial drivers and customer feedback. "Style preferences change over time without delivering incremental value, so we've focused the development effort on the delivery of tangible value changes for end users as well as for our channel partners," added Treharne. "The biggest challenge is to ensure that we allow our customers to stay ahead in a rapidly changing industry."

Dovetail provides a pre-deployment network assessment tool to verify the inherent capabilities of the network as well as a simplified interface to configure and manage the handsets through their whole life. Dovetail also

offers a consolidated view of the quality of service experienced by customers as well as diagnostic information required by support engineers so that channel partners can be notified proactively when they need to take action.

Personal touch

"Self-service and automation form part of an overall channel offering that builds a trusted partnership," said Treharne. "As many partners segment their market focus to serve specific business verticals, the personal touch is a key part of that delivery. We've been working with a number of partners to deliver attributes of human interaction to their portals through the integration of technologies like WebRTC. This work recognises that

not all users understand the language that's used in the industry to describe the technologies available – nor should they need to. With the rise of Amazon Echo and Google Home, it's feasible that an enterprising B2C communications provider will deliver seamless integration between those physical interfaces and their control systems."

There's a drive to improve efficiency by integrating portals and back office systems. From Siphon's own experience, around 70 per cent of orders are placed over an API that provides direct feedback to customers as well as minimising the potential for human error and the time taken to process an order. In the absence of

this kind of efficient process, the ability for Siphon to scale its business would have been restricted.

Despite big advances in portal development there is often a misconception about the extent of automation they offer resellers, believes Dave Dadds, CEO, VanillalP. "Our concept with Uboss is that it goes beyond bundling services and reseller branded billing," he said. "It is the central platform for managing all elements of the reseller's business and back office, including adding their own non VanillalP services."

Single bundle solutions are not cutting it any more, believes Dadds. "Resellers need to be able to put together their own mix of services, tariffs and 100 per cent white label all customer touch points," he added. "We have to continually develop Uboss to give resellers the differentiation they need as well as additional revenue streams. For example, the SMS integration we have built into the BroadSoft call centre solution. Another key focus area is reporting and analytics, not just for customers but also for resellers."

The Internet has changed everything, not least buyer behaviour. And considering the way customers purchase and consume service now, portals like Uboss are not

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just a way of accessing the service they actually become a part of the product.

"Customers can take service from our resellers 24/7 and they only see the packages and tariffs that the reseller is using," said Dadds.

VanillaIP has just moved into a brand new 10,000 sq ft office in India to support its 80-plus plus Uboss software development team and the growth it sees within this unit. "Interestingly, we only need four BroadSoft engineers, which is what many people in the channel know us for," said Dadds. "This reflects the reality of our business as a software development firm. I don't think any of us are in 'telecoms' anymore. The days of buying a closed PBX that did everything the customer wants are over and customers and resellers are embracing multi-vendor solutions.

"The key question for the channel is how can you bring all this together and present it as a single solution for the customer where they can access everything in one place. Uboss unifies everything for the customer and reseller. If the customer has to log into different portals to get billing, call recordings, call centre reports, add users etc, that's just a mess. Customer service is absolutely key for us all in reducing churn but if you are running around hand cranking different services you will struggle."

Uboss includes a fully featured ticketing system provided free of charge for reseller partners that use VanillaIP's billing. And a Feature Request button offers a traffic light system where requests are

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accepted, prioritised and scheduled, so the partner can see the status of all their open feature requests. "Typically, we release 20 new features in Uboss each month," added Dadds. "Approximately 50 per cent of the product development in Uboss is driven by partner feature requests. Innovation and enhancement is vital to our partners and their customers' tools. So we've gone a long way beyond provisioning and billing but have a lot further to go yet."

Differentiation

Virtual1 has always placed 1Portal at the centre of its business, with committed budget and previous spend now in excess of £2 million. "We know that making things easy for our partners is a huge part of our differentiation in the market," stated Neil Wilson, Product and Marketing Manager. "So we built 1Portal to combine quoting, ordering and service management as well as to share sales enablement collateral and operational guides.

"This helps to drive more collaboration with our partners, helping them to keep overheads down while driving revenue opportunities up. The success of 1Portal is

clearly shown in the usage data, with over 90 per cent of partners transacting through 1Portal and an average of 5,000 quotes being produced every month. Over 60 per cent of our orders are fully automated from quote to go live. This means we can run leaner than many legacy networks while delivering a higher level of service, driving down our costs and ultimately those of our partners."

Business value can take many forms, but automation is going to be the difference maker in today's marketplace, believes Wilson. "Partners need to provide differentiation through service and customer satisfaction, as well as reduced costs and quicker time to revenue," he added. "Automation is how they can realise this, as well as other benefits such as improved end customer satisfaction through faster, right first time delivery. The more successful the project, the happier the customer and the greater the scope for upsell opportunities."

Wilson believes that the future for portals lies in an accompanying suite of APIs. "Portals have been fantastic at moving the industry forward and streamlining the relationship between wholesaler and channel," he commented. "The next generation of resellers are pushing that relationship further and want to integrate their own systems directly and deliver a native experience that connects with their supply chain automatically. To that end we have already delivered the first of a suite of APIs to allow our channel partners to integrate directly with us for quote generation." ■