

# Why adaptability is key

No area of the comms industry is so alive with innovation and adaptability than the billing sector which is in perpetual step with the march of the market. Here, we talk to three leading protagonists to gain a collective view of the forces driving the current and future development of modern billing platforms.

**A** sense of challenge typifies the billing sector which is under pressure to seize the moment and refashion itself in accordance with the new customer landscape. It is an environment in which legacy architectures are likely to fail in all their aspects, believes VanillaIP CEO Dave Dadds. "A billing system can easily become like a speed limiter on a racing car if not designed from the ground up for its specific market, in our case on-demand cloud services," he stated.

"The big challenge is how to provide on-demand multi-product and multi-vendor self-service in a simple user based environment, and bill the elements regardless of type, service, packages, hardware, minutes etc so that all revenue opportunities are available to charge. Then there's the different commercial options to consider."

It comes as no surprise that traditional billing practices are dying out, but the

new market offers a far brighter future for resellers, and they must grasp its demands, urged Dadds. "Cloud is about delivering big and micro products," he added. "To make the most of cloud, resellers must be able to capitalise on micro products like apps on mobile phones without a noticeable overhead. This is why billing is less of an external service and more a core function of an integrated ecosystem."

"Once customers get used to the fact that cloud communications consists of a myriad of on-demand services for which they only pay when they consume, we will see a buyer driven market. At the moment big service providers are driving the market with restrictive bundles and one-size-fits-all solutions, but an expansion of buyer knowledge and evolving worker behaviour will soon change that."

The future direction of billing lies not so much in the technology push as in the specific user requirements of the day, says Dadds.



Dave Dadds

## The market is shifting and we need to react to emerging suppliers, evolving products and a changing customer profile

"Our developments are heavily driven by the feature request system in the Uboss portal which is open to our staff, our resellers and all customers," he explained.

### Listening to the market

"We listen to the needs of the market and develop solutions to support them. For example, automation reduces back office costs and customer self-service also brings savings. Suppliers with a dynamic and fast evolving portfolio of services will inspire confidence. Slow and steady no longer wins the race. Agility is key. The market is shifting and we need to react to emerging suppliers, evolving products and a changing customer profile."

Automation and integration are also core to Inform Billing's development strategy. The company invests approximately 40-45 per cent of turnover every year into improving products and services. Its Managing Director Shaun Bodsworth said: "Over the past few years our strategy has been predominantly geared around product development, and we have invested over £1 million in converting our entire billing platform into a fully web-based application."

"We have been addressing the increasing requirement for automation and integration through the use of APIs. By developing a web-based application it has become much

easier to 'hook' up with other applications and we are currently working to build useful integration with a range of complementary systems."

In terms of integration, Bodsworth noted the wide variety of systems that Inform Billing's platform is required to integrate with, from CRM to accounts packages, support desks to payment gateways and ERP systems, not to mention carrier providers. "That's in addition to the requirement to process CDRs in a more automated way," he added. "It is no longer sufficient to tie-in with one mainstream provider, and necessary to transfer key information between multiple

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different systems of the reseller's choosing."

New technological areas in which billing systems are vital include cloud and subscription services and more inclusive package-like propositions, observed Bodsworth. "The trend has moved away from creating a single platform as specialist products allow for more tailored solutions for specific operational areas while enabling the systems to talk and transfer information," he commented. "This can then be taken a level further with multiple subscriptions in a single package. Resellers can often be confused as to why, when the proposition appears simple, their billing and particularly their invoice verification and reporting is so much more complex.

## **Complexity**

"A reseller may want to provide a small business with a 10 user package that includes office connectivity, mobile connectivity, hosted voice, office 365 licences and IT support on a per-user or per-company subscription. While this creates a simple to understand proposition it adds significant complexity to the billing element. The end bill for the customer is clean and simple, but all of the individual components of the connected proposition need to be validated on a line by line, item by item basis, which may also include components from multiple sources."

Arvind Meghani, Managing Director of ebillz, is focused on improving the firm's



**Shaun Bodsworth**

cloud-based billing solution. "Customers are used to the flexibility and security of the cloud solutions we offer in other areas of the businesses, and billing is no exception," he stated. "We'll also be focusing on growth and attracting new players in the market.

"Flexibility will be key. Billing providers need to be able to handle all types of data sources. Some development will be required to make it an intuitive process for resellers to map these out themselves. Alternatively, billing providers must be responsive to varying reseller needs."

Meghani also pointed to the growing importance of billing solutions for converged product portfolios, IoT and cloud products. "Our systems handle these already and we've collaborated with industry players to offer a tailored billing solution for their IoT customers," he explained. "Going forward, billing efficiency and intuition will be key. For example, mobile, SIP, IoT and inbound on a single, understandable invoice. We're focused on developing this area." ■