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Triple-play trickery: Beware the buzzword bandwagon

Lately, it seems that almost every pitch I hear from marketers uses the term “triple play” in an attempt to leverage what they perceive as a hot market. But many of those pitchers don’t even understand the meaning of “triple play,” and most are stretching the truth more than a little in using it to describe their newest product. Now, I’m not the arbiter of how to use words. But I have followed the voice-, video-, and data-services market since before broadband data and digital video became realities. My point is to advise you to closely scrutinize anything that mentions “triple play” because I am increasingly finding that marketers are often using the hype to hide the lack of compelling features in products or to get publicity.

The term “triple play” implies a service offering from telecom carriers, MSOs (multiple systems operators), satellite operators, or maybe even power utilities. The term “triple” implies that the offering includes voice, video, and data services. The telecom carriers need the revenue from triple-play offerings to help cover the revenue shortfall they attribute to the commoditization of voice services. MSOs, at least in North America, are typically the incumbents in profitable video services and were the first to broadly offer broadband. You might think MSOs would want no part of the low-margin voice business, but, realistically, it costs almost nothing these days for them to add voice to their video and data offerings.

Triple-play offerings have attracted interest from analysts and other experts because the success of these offerings will go a long way in determining which carriers are still with us in a few years. Even the politicians

have jumped on the bandwagon, as the telecom carriers strive to offer video without signing franchise agreements with communities, as MSOs must do.

Because you read so much about triple play, vendors of ICs, boards, and even cables or power supplies are using the term to promote their products. For example, the spin doctors label home-networking products as triple-play products. Perhaps home LANs will eventually find use in distributing video around homes, but none have yet proved capable. Moreover, some, such as power-line-based HomePlug technology, will probably never carry high-definition-quality video.

There’s also hype aplenty from the communication-IC crowd. Vendors of everything from Ethernet switches and network processors to traffic managers and network-search engines trumpet triple-play capability. Some of these products may prove key enablers in network equipment that service providers rely on to offer the triple play. But most of the vendors claim that their chosen technology is the only avenue to the triple play. I’d argue again that triple play is simply a service offering and consumers don’t care how carriers deliver it.

Recently, companies have been

bombarding me with presentations on the theme of a converged network that carries video and voice over the same IP (Internet Protocol) transport-protocol device that delivers data. Now, I’m all for converged networks. I was editor of *CommVerge* magazine in the 1999 to 2002 time frame, and *CommVerge* focused on convergence. But we were wrong then about how quickly a converged network might become reality. And I’m still not sure how fast the carriers can broadly move to IPTV—especially when the requirement includes carrying multiple HDTV-quality streams.

Although current telecom networks aren’t IPTV-capable, those networks aren’t the biggest roadblock to triple-play offerings. The last mile remains the roadblock. As I recently chronicled, the carriers are just beginning to roll out IPTV-capable broadband pipes (**Reference 1**). The triple-play offerings now on the market almost universally rely on an overlay network to deliver the video. And no matter how many communication-IC vendors hype their triple-play ICs, carriers will not rip up core and access networks and install new ones unless the converged network can reach the home. Even if or when the carriers move to converged networks, they will be just that: multimedia-capable IP networks, not triple-play networks.

The carriers get it. They are even talking “quad-play,” throwing mobile service into the bundle. And mobile services clearly don’t arrive through a converged network. But the enabling-technology vendors will continue the hype.**EDN**

REFERENCE

1 Wright, Maury, “100-Mbps broadband: How, why, when, and where?” *EDN*, July 6, 2006, pg 48, www.edn.com/article/CA6347250.

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