

How Subscriber Management Systems Have Evolved Over The Years

As Wi-Fi has given rise to an array of bandwidth-hungry in-home applications, subscriber management has evolved from service providers offering new TV programming packages to building real relationships with users.

By Bryan J. Rader / *UpStream Network*

For many years, subscriber management systems were nothing more than billing systems geared toward private cable and internet service businesses. They had a ledger for each product offered – including basic cable, HBO and high-speed internet – and any customer care representative could easily manage the system.

Today, these systems have grown to become an essential part of service providers’ support function, and they no longer track just the basics of managing customers.

In the old days, I remember, a lot of cable operators used old-school products that worked for the basics of the broadband business. Their usefulness diminished significantly, however, when a real change in customer interactions emerged.

Fifteen years ago, independent cable companies outsourced their call centers, which also included subscriber management tools, or paid licensing fees and staffed the call centers internally. These tools were not very sophisticated back then – they could schedule work orders and track payments.

RETHINKING THE CUSTOMER EXPERIENCE

Over the past decade, managing customer experience has changed dramatically, putting a lot of pressure on service providers to rethink how customers view this part of the business.

“Having the right set of tools in your subscriber management arsenal is critical,” says Josh Thackery, CEO of NorthStar TeleSolutions. “The very nature of how we manage this relationship has been turned on its head, and operators

are dealing with having to give their reps the right capabilities to support them properly.”

Thackery saw this change occurring in recent years when most of his business was moving from digital TV to broadband-centric service issues.

“The communication was very different,” he says. “In the past, it was about paying a bill, adding a premium channel, checking on a digital set-top box. Now it is monitoring 20 different devices on a Wi-Fi connection and being able to provide answers to a whole different set of questions.”

Cable customers also interact very differently than broadband subscribers do with their service providers. They want immediate action. They use the product at different hours, often late into the evening. And many of them want to communicate through chat, text or email but not by phone.

GETTING PROACTIVE

The role of the service provider has evolved, too, and includes more of a “network monitoring” need with a strong set of sirens, alerts and messages to proactively guide the provider to potential issues.

Thackery was aware of this development when he toured one of his potential customer’s call centers. “It was trying to run its broadband business without any tools,” he says. “I could see the problems and frustration the reps felt.”

That is why NorthStar went to work to build the industry’s first customized subscriber management solution designed specifically for the core needs of the MDU market.

It is called MDU+. “This solution was tailored to the call center’s reps’ needs in handling a myriad of service issues,” he says. “We monitor devices and users, not unit addresses, and can track problems and experiences over time.”

MDU+ has a lot of unique tools, such as a community portal to sign up and the ability to view a dashboard of performance metrics. MDU+ also includes customer relationship tools, workforce efficiency applications and billing mechanisms.

“We see this as an interface that is modular for the needs of any service provider working in the MDU market,” Thackery continues. “It is the best way to manage and enhance the service experience for an operator.”

And providers are jumping on board. “We like it a lot,” reported Dave Erkman of SpeedCast. “It will give us the needed data points to be proactive with our users.”

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These new systems also come with revenue features, such as single-button upgrade features to go to a higher internet speed tier. In addition, the product is designed to support the proliferation of mobile devices in MDU residents’ homes, including smart-home features such as digital door locks and energy management tools.

MDU+ is one example of this evolution in management tools. There are other offerings on the market today, many of which were re-engineered from the single-family market. Some are excellent solutions and have been

picked up by many reputable providers.

There is no question the market has changed dramatically from 15 years ago. Subscriber management is not about picking a programming package, but about building a real relationship with users that gives them confidence in service providers’ product and support teams. ❖

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