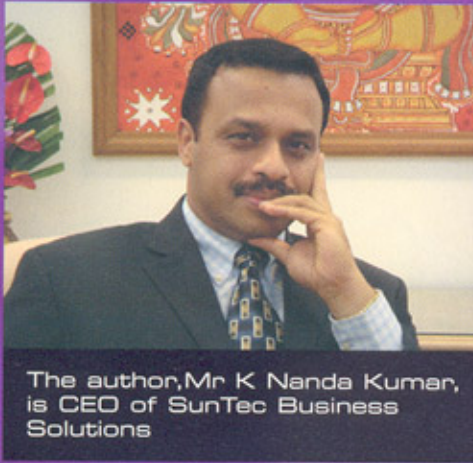


As the global telecommunications industry embraces 3G – showing significant growth in technology, services and volumes – K Nanda Kumar, CEO, SunTec Business Solutions reports that billing vendors are confronted with new challenges arising out of increased innovation in service offerings and diverse business models.

Billing multi-level convergence



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Recent trends in the industry have thrown up new opportunities for billing vendors, arguably, the most dynamic group of software players in the IT plethora. Convergence and consolidation in the telecom industry have prompted the emergence of new players with novel business structures like the Multi-Service Operators (MSOs) and Mobile Virtual Network Operators (MVNOs). Moreover, with the rollout of 3G networks and adoption of IP backbone by conventional telcos, cable and broadband players, new revenue streams are on the horizon.

Traditional telcos are plagued by two concerns – upgrading legacy systems, and integrating disparate systems to streamline operations. Most operators have opted for a complete overhaul of outdated systems, to garner the ability to accommodate the wide gamut of 3G services coupled with the flexibility to support innovative service bundles. Another approach being adopted is a gradual move to an integrated billing infrastructure, a phased replacement driven by the introduction of next generation services.

Emerging telecom service providers, on the other hand, addressing specific segments of the market, provide highly specialised services. For these emerging players, launching voice and content services on the fly holds the key to competing with the established giants. Thus, they opt for an integrated billing infrastructure right from mediation and service provisioning to rating, billing, payment processing, revenue settlement and assurance.

Though the conventional telcos continue to pursue excellence in streamlining their billing operations to achieve better margins to consolidate themselves, the upcoming players will demand a more innovative and integrated approach from billing vendors. The billing vendors will gradually move up the value chain – from mere solution providers to true service enablers. The opportunity lies in creating compelling 'plug-in roll-out' service packages. These packages, built in partnership with value added service providers, are ready to use since they have all network elements and back office functions required inbuilt within the package and can be easily integrated to any existing network and back office platforms.

The multi-level convergence, in terms of applications, services and networks, rampant in the telecom industry today, will get reflected in the operations of billing vendors on a higher scale in the coming years. One can witness the foray of 'one-stop' solution providers, lining up CRM, billing and revenue assurance products under one umbrella.