mobeon *Messaging for a Dynamic World*

Videomail is here

Short introduction to the benefits of videomail

1 Abstract

Video calling is a key service to drive users towards using 3G networks and services. However without videomail being offered as part of an overall video service, many video revenue opportunities are lost. As well as improving the efficiency of communication, videomail services enable many exciting new capabilities to subscribers. Network operators can further enhance the video user experience and their own brand value through the use of virtual characters to guide users around these new services.

2 Videomail is here

The promise of 3G technology is finally being delivered, with a wide choice of good quality handsets being available and customers having an ever increasing awareness of the new networks. Network operators need to persuade existing and new customers to move to away from 2G in order to recover the investment of building new 3G networks. Of course concepts like 3G and faster mobile bandwidth do not sell themselves to consumers on their own. 3G needs new applications and new features to convert end users.

Why videomail?
A key mass market service which differentiates 3G from 2G is video calling. Video calling offers end users a richer, "space age" style of communication where emotions, location and body language become part of the conversation. Video calling cannot be provided easily on 2G networks due to bandwidth limitations. End user studies show a strong consumer interest in the technology, especially as a very immediate and spontaneous way to communicate with friends and family. It has many benefits to mobile operators over most other data applications and value added services, which will also increase its take up: making a video call is as easy to the user as making a regular voice call, there is no need to navigate complex phone menus and there is no configuration in the terminal.

How does it work?
A video call works in a very similar manner to a voice call. Just as a voice handset has a microphone and ear piece to record and playback sound, so a video phone also has a camera and a colour screen to record and show video. In current 3G networks, telephony channels in the network are dedicated to transporting the video call, just like they are dedicated to a telephone call in regular networks using circuit switched technology. Internet based packet switched technology, otherwise known as Voice over IP, has been growing in interest as an alternative mechanism to transport voice for the last ten years, and it is likely that mobile video calling technology will also work over IP in the future. Just as the tones generated by the telephone keypad of a voice phone can be used to interact with automated voice information or voice messaging systems, so they can also be used to interact with and control automated video systems. The user interface for video calling on a video capable mobile handset is as simple as making a voice call. The user enters the number they want to call (or retrieves it from the phone address book) and simply presses a video calling button rather than the regular voice call button.

Despite the attraction of the service to end users, there are however many times when a video call will not be successful. The user being called may be busy or outside network coverage, their phone may not even have 3G or video calling capability. In these circumstances a videomail solution becomes essential for an operator to capture the full revenue opportunities of video, by answering and completing a video call which would otherwise fail.

Videomail allows a video message to be recorded and delivered as immediately as possible to another subscriber. It can be used either to record and deliver video clips where a video call is not successful or it can be used as a way to share experiences where the users doesn't want or need to call the recipient directly at that time. It maintains the spontaneous nature of video calling and offers many additional functions. Users can record messages for multiple contacts, or set a timer on the message for it to be delivered at a specific time and date, for instance a birthday greeting. A message to a 2G subscriber can still be delivered using MMS technology or as an e-mail. The service is very easy to use, just like making a voice call, and requires minimal special configuration in the phone.

Put a face to your network

Video services offer new ways for network operators to communicate and promote themselves to subscribers. In traditional voice solutions, automated services give spoken prompts to guide the user round the service. These voice prompts are generally not well received by end users as they are considered dull and uninteresting. Videomail gives an extra dimension of visual video interfaces for subscribers to interact with. The network operator can greatly improve the interaction with a video service by having a recorded or animated personality or virtual character guide the users around the service. This virtual character can communicate with, impress and entertain the subscriber while helping them gain the most usage from the videomail service. If the character is specially designed to reinforce the brand or sub-brand of the network operator, it becomes a powerful brand marketing tool. A selection of different characters can be used according to the different subscriber segments, for example young subscribers can have a fun cartoon character to show them the service, business users might have a more serious and mature character. New revenue models can be created where subscribers pay to use special premium characters for their video service, for example popular film stars or the latest cartoon characters. Video characters can be continuously adapted and updated to maintain subscriber interest, for instance to change behaviour or appearance according to the time of year or for special events like public holidays or important sports games. Where traditional voice prompts are dull and uninspiring, video characters are dynamic and appealing.

The opportunity with personalization

A user can be given the ability to record a video greeting to invite callers to leave a video message. This personalises the service and increases system usage by encouraging people to leave messages. Users can be given further options to personalise the way the video messaging system interacts with their friends and family, for instance by recording different greetings based on who is calling. A business executive can set up a formal greeting message if their boss calls and a casual and relaxed greeting for family and friends. A teenager can have a serious greeting for parents and teachers and a funny or joke greeting for their friends. Technically this is achieved by the videomail system looking at the incoming caller information when setting up the video call and selecting the appropriate greeting as previously defined by the mailbox user.

From fun voice greetings to video greetings

Greetings can be further exploited by the network operator, by offering their subscribers the opportunity to use a number of pre-configured greeting messages for their mailboxes using recordings of well known actors, celebrity pop stars or popular cartoon characters. These greetings can use the catch-phrases and voice of the celebrity character to surprise and entertain callers, at the same time giving the user a boost in status by associating themselves with a famous character. So the teenager might use greetings recorded by the latest pop stars, or an executive could entertain his children by having a greeting message based on their favourite cartoon characters. The network operator can charge the subscriber a small fee for these celebrity greetings, thus opening up a new revenue stream. Research has shown a significant interest in these kinds of services, especially from younger mobile users.

3 Summary

While video calling and videomail are still at an early stage of deployment, having only been launched by a few network operators to date, they clearly have an exciting future ahead. As well as driving revenues from terminating video calls which would otherwise fail, videomail offers new opportunities for subscribers to share video experiences and for network operators to reinforce their market brand and to drive revenues through further value added services. As such, videomail cannot be ignored for any 3G network.