



Network/Systems Management

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Network World's Network/Systems Management Newsletter, 10/09/06

Why we need an 'iTunes' for inventory management

By Jeff Cotrupe

Welcome to my inaugural Network World column. In a past life, I've worked for Gartner and RHK (the latter acquired in 2005 by Ovum, the former the king of those magic quadrants that we all either love or despise). Part of my charter these days as a consulting analyst to EMA is to explore key areas of network management innovation and synergy transcending the boundaries of "enterprise" and "carrier/service provider." One such cross-borders expedition began earlier this year when I collaborated with Dennis Drogseth on the world's first (to anyone's knowledge) report on next generation asset management, which established NGAM as the intersection of traditional asset management with service management and put 26 NGAM-worthy providers through the analyst MRI to assess their technology and market muscle.

The corollary to enterprise- and systems-focused NGAM is service provider- and network-focused inventory management, or what some term "network resource management" or "service resource management" (NRM/SRM). Whatever you call it, the inventory game is all about one core precept: you can't provision what you can't see. In other words, talk to me all day about high-transaction-volume service order management systems and my hat's off to you if you actually touch the network elements and perform configuration and service activation. Without an accurate, real-time view of your inventory, you might as well throw your service orders and device configuration changes into the wind.

For those who may not already know, inventory systems are among the myriad flavors of operations support systems (OSS) - software that automates service management, customer care and billing, and all other processes for service providers. Whether you're talking about OSS for carriers or for enterprise IT, the idea is much the same: OSS rapidly and efficiently tackles the technical "plumbing" so that users can focus resources and mindshare on delivering business value.

The main difference between OSS for service providers and enterprise IT, at least conceptually, is that in IT your "customers" are almost always internal while to a service provider they are mostly external: subscribers and other network and service users. One example is billing. A service provider's billing system could be focused on billing external subscribers and handling carrier-to-carrier settlements (payments for network usage), while such a system at the enterprise could be managing chargebacks to internal IT departments and users.

In terms of delivering accurate and real-time inventory, talking about it (or promising it to a customer) and actually delivering it are entirely different matters. One piece of the puzzle is the continuing challenge inventory management providers face populating their databases with current and accurate network equipment/element (NE) data so when their service provider customers need to quickly add new equipment to their networks it's already in the inventory database and ready to manage, instead of being weeks or months away. For IT managers, they rely on a friendly systems engineer, manual, audits that are usually incomplete or aren't done frequently enough to stay current, or other channels that are not as nefarious as they are haphazard and non-standard.

The solution? An industry exchange standardizing the way inventory and asset management vendors obtain current, accurate network equipment data with which to create NE profiles in their systems. This would speed network deployments for service providers and NE manufacturers alike while making the delivery of OSSes less painful and more profitable for software companies.

My analogy is this: when it comes to NE data, too often we currently as an industry are downloading MP3s from shadowy Web sites, by hook or by crook. What we need to get to is something like iTunes.

True enough, it's bound to get easier if the Alcatels and Lucent's of the world continue to merge and all users had to make are three or five phone calls to reach all the world's network equipment manufacturers, but it appears that an industry clearinghouse for inventory data is needed no matter what.

Richard Zambuni is global marketing director, geospatial, for Bentley Systems, the market leader in outside plant inventory management for North American cable broadband operators. While at inventory management vendor Visionael a few years ago, Zambuni launched an alliance program designed to shine some light on the black hole of NE data acquisition.

"Through Visionael Ready we obtained device data for a manufacturer's entire product line, and then first access whenever they rolled out a new device. It also enabled us as a smaller player to develop closer relationships with the manufacturers, opening the door to joint selling opportunities," said Zambuni. That was particularly true in that the manufacturer could offer service providers a managed network solution instead of the typical hardware sale, and it paid off for Visionael in terms of marquee names joining the program and jointly winning new managed network contracts.

It's great that some vendors "get it." It is also refreshing to see a management-focused industry consortium working toward universal manageability. The TeleManagement Forum has a multi-team program committed to developing multi-Technology OSS Program (mTOP), a single, modular next-generation operations support systems (NGOSS)-based interface specification for next generation network (NGN) management. "The mTOP Interface will be specified for implementation through NGOSS-compliant products, and will solve the commercial-out-of-the-box

integration plug-and-play requirements for OSS integration," said Rebecca Sendel, director of marketing at the Forum and former product marketing manager for service activation vendor Astracon. She added that mTOP will unify the management interface specifications of three well-established TM Forum products: Multi-Technology Network Management (MTNM), Multi-Technology Operations Systems Interface (MTOSI) and IP Network Management (IPNM).

At the moment, the main beneficiaries of something like an industrywide device data clearinghouse would be OSS vendors, particularly those providing inventory solutions. It's not clear that enterprise asset management vendors are thinking along these lines yet, but maybe they should. One that probably will is IBM. Of course you know IBM as the global IT infrastructure/solutions/services powerhouse, but in recent months it has begun expanding its asset management capabilities and moving into inventory management. In August 2006, IBM announced its [acquisition of asset management leader MRO Software](#), which brings to IBM one of the strongest, most robust and proven lifecycle asset management solutions in the industry as well as modern service desk and other capabilities. Then just last week, IBM announced it has [acquired the Dorana product line](#) and associated assets from Ubiquity to gain inventory capabilities in support of IBM's IT Service Management strategy.

The bottom line is that inventory and asset management vendors are sounding increasingly like Jerry Maguire: "Help US help YOU." Seems like an industry exchange that does so could be music to their customers' ears.

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