



commentary

Communication breakdown

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The communications industry is not doing a very good job at communicating

As someone who regularly attends press conferences, listens to presentations and has one-to-one briefings, I've had more than my fair share of head-scratching moments. When the latest acronym is presented, perhaps with a PowerPoint slide showing how it fits into the OSI seven-layer network model, my eyes — I have to confess — tend to glaze over.

At this point I should say that I'm not a technology expert. However, I do need to understand the basics of what's going on in order to put the technology in a business context (probably not a dissimilar task confronting non-technical senior telco executives). But much, much too often, a blizzard of acronyms and tech-speak blurs the key business and strategic issues.

I think one of the main problems is that not enough attention is paid to defining terms. I remember listening to one presenter, speaking at a telecom networks conference, who warned against the misuse of IP. It was only after some time wondering what he was going on about that I realised he was referring to Intellectual Property rather than the Internet Protocol.

This may seem a small and trivial example, but I think it's part of a wider communication problem. Take FTTx, or fibre-to-the-X. This acronym has spawned a number of derivatives: FTTH (fibre-to-the-home), FTTP (premise), FTTC (curb, or perhaps cabinet), FTTK (if you spell curb as kerb), FTTN (node, or could be neighbourhood), FTTB (building) and FTTN (node).

Sadly, I doubt if this unnecessarily long list is even comprehensive. And such is the confusion — it's difficult, for example, to usefully compare research from different firms who use different definitions — the FTTH Council decided last year to publish an 'agreed definition of terms'. It whittled FTTx down to two variants: FTTH and FTTB.

This still leaves FTTN, which (I think) is generally understood as fibre-to-the-node plus a DSL connection to the subscriber. So,

would it be fair to say that FTTx — logically — should really encompass FTTH, FTTB and FTTN? Maybe not. The IDATE consultancy recently released its 'FTTx subscriber' figures for Europe, which were published by the FTTH Council Europe. Its FTTx definition excluded FTTN.

You might think this is a pedantic rant on my part, overdosed somehow on PowerPoint presentations, but there is a serious point to be made on the communication challenge between IT/network experts and non-technical senior telco executives. There clearly needs to be a common language between the two camps — or an extremely skilled communicator — for a meaningful dialogue to take place. This is more urgent than ever given that the industry is going through a transformation of unprecedented proportions.

Vendors and operators also have their own communication challenges. As I write this, I have in front of me yet another PowerPoint slide. It's a diagram of a service delivery framework (SDF) comprising the IMS core, service enablers, billing systems and a multitude of other 'core functions'. Needless to say, it's mind-numbingly complex but not only that — according to the TeleManagement Forum (TMF) — each vendor and operator has its own version of the SDF. There is no standardised approach and it's slowing down the deployment of IMS-based services. Vendors and operators are not singing from the same SDF hymn sheet.

Given the complexity of the telecom industry, it's perhaps inevitable that some communication problems exist. Yet most operators still have the habit of foisting acronyms onto the public as a service: think WAP, GPRS, 3G and HSDPA. Now we have a new crop waiting in the wings: HSUPA, HSPA (a combination of HSDPA and HSUPA) and maybe LTE.

Confusing ourselves is one thing but confusing the customer is pretty dangerous. ◀