

Putting Products First

By Scott St. John

There's a seismic shift taking place in the way communications service providers (CSPs) view the world. For many CSPs, their focus is changing from a network-centric view to a more customer-centric one. As a result, they are starting to see products and services as the heart of their customers' experience. This shift is not only having a direct impact on customers, but it's having a significant impact on the way CSPs are looking at communications technology products as well.

When asked about this emerging trend, Ernest Margitta of Tribold commented: "We're definitely seeing our customers looking for real solutions that will have a tangible impact on the customer experience." He continued, "We are also seeing the decision making moving away from IT and network operations to the business decision makers, marketers, and product managers who drive top-line revenue growth." And, Tribold is in a good position to know.

Tribold manages over \$64 billion in products and services for their customers in 20 different countries. The company's suite of products is specifically designed to more quickly deliver, monetize, evaluate, and adjust their product and service offerings. However, how their customers are leveraging their products to generate tangible return on investment (ROI) is what makes them truly unique. Their customers include a long list of CSPs such as CenturyLink, BSKyB, Orange, Telecom New Zealand, Teliasonera, and others who have used Tribold's Enterprise Product Management (EPM) software to successfully reduce product delivery time by up to 75 percent. For at least one customer, that reduction in time to market has equated to top-line revenue growth of \$125 million annually.

Fueling Competition

For CSPs, innovative new products and services provide valuable ways to leverage new and existing infrastructure to generate revenue and increase profitability. They also provide a mechanism by which they can differentiate their offerings and harness the capabilities and resources that make them truly unique. However, the process for bringing new products to market is complicated and involves multiple stakeholders across a complex organization. The time, cost, and complexity it takes to orchestrate a new product launch can stifle innovation, cost the company its competitive edge, or even kill the new product or service altogether.



Companies like Tribold provide product management software that can help to simplify this process. These products help streamline the design, build, and test processes, and reduce the complexity and time-to-market. This idea-to-cash cycle can have significant impacts on a service provider's business including:

- **Reduced Time-to-market:** CSPs can achieve new service revenue faster, enabling them to capture revenue that would otherwise be lost.
- **Heighten Competitiveness:** By launching more innovative, new services faster, CSPs can achieve a higher level of competitiveness.
- **Lower Cost-to-market:** By simplifying, consolidating, and automating the product launch process, CSPs can lower the operational cost and eliminate the inefficiencies associated with this process.
- **Optimize Offerings:** By providing real-time visibility into the entire product life-cycle and performance, CSPs can see actual product performance and modify their offerings to ensure optimal uptake.

Each of these impact areas can have a profound effect on a CSP's business, but the real value is harnessing innovation. By providing a consolidated and collaborative modeling platform for product development, CSPs can more easily capture, develop and collaborate on new ideas from the onset and take them to market faster. This can be an incredible competitive advantage and, if it's not the secret sauce, it's probably the pot it's cooked in.

In a recent Tribold case study, Donald Toland,

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director of program operations at CenturyLink was quoted saying, “We were looking at an evolution on the same scale as manufacturing several decades ago when the industry transformed from designing with a pencil to full blown CAD modeling. We wanted to model products, but hadn’t the tools to model.”

The Microsoft Mash

As previously reported by Pipeline, Microsoft has been making significant headway into the operational and business support systems (OSS and BSS) arena by way of their “Mashable Ecosystem.” As recently as this issue, Microsoft is being featured in the Breaking Benchmarks article which highlights their recent accomplishment with ecosystem partner Redknee in reaching 250 million subscribers. This benchmark put Microsoft, and it’s ecosystem partners, in the Tier-1 scalability category from the start.

“We’ve had tremendous success working with communications service providers and our ecosystem partners,” said Johan Norvik, managing director for telecommunications for Microsoft. “Each day we are combining Microsoft technology with our partners’ products to provide real solutions that support the heart of telecom operations.”

Also an avid Microsoft partner, Tribold announced their support for Microsoft SQL Server 2012 last month. ISVs, like Tribold, are teaming up with Microsoft so that they can focus on their core product expertise, expand their footprint, and leverage the collective expertise of the ecosystem at the same time:

“We’re a big (Microsoft) advocate. Having built our entire suite on Microsoft from the outset enables us to focus heavily on the user experience and functionality rather than underlying platform technology,” continues Margitta. “That’s the biggest differentiator we have in the marketplace against companies like Oracle and Amdocs. It allows us to remain user-focused versus technology focused.”

While enabling ISVs to focus on their core competency is a considerable advantage, the former should not go without notice. Vendors like Tribold and Redknee are slowly chipping away at the foothold of industry titans by leveraging a titan of their own, Microsoft. “It takes the platform discussion off the table,” as Margitta puts it.

Through the ecosystem, Microsoft’s partners are able to openly leverage Microsoft, their relationships, and other ecosystem partners to offer carrier-grade scalability, cloud-based solutions, and lower cost of ownership based upon pre-integrated solutions that are delivered on a common platform. The result is a more cost effective solution that is easier to deploy, which may keep competitors like Oracle on their toes, if not their heels.

“The product experience is what underpins a satisfying customer experience”

“We win on usability every time,” Margitta adds. “While competitors are focused on a diverse and often disjointed set of products, Tribold is focused on one. When you combine Tribold EPM with the platform and SaaS capabilities it eliminates many potential concerns that may have previously presented an obstacle. Cloud-based delivery ensures Tribold is treated more like a desktop application which makes it easier to buy and easier to deploy directly to the business user.”

And, that’s just not lip service. Tribold has recently done very well winning business from Oracle shops like Orange, CenturyLink, and Sky and they don’t see that momentum slowing down anytime soon.

The Heart of the Matter

CSPs can leverage product management solutions to better design, develop, deliver, and hone a superior customer experience. An experience that is impacted more by interactions with the customer’s products than the less frequent interactions with their service provider. The appeal, diversity, and quality of those products are also what will most likely not only attract customers, but retain them as well. Even some of the least liked CSPs may be able to attract customers through superior products and services, but the key to customer retention may be how well a CSP is able to capitalize on their understanding of their customers to evolve their product offerings in order to keep their customers engaged. In this respect, the product experience is at the center of the customer experience and any product innovation cascades through to new and existing customers (Figure 1).

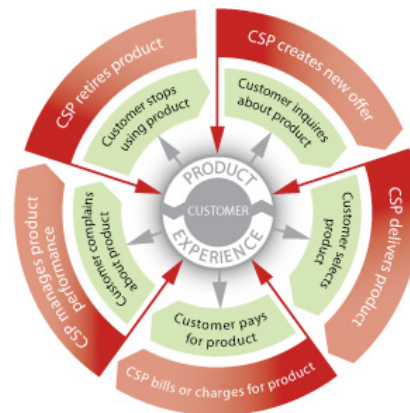


Figure 1 - The impact of the product experience on the customer life-cycle.

“The product experience is what underpins a satisfying customer experience: the products are what drive a customer to engage with a service provider; the diversity and attractiveness of offers and services are what generate additional revenue, and the quality and consistency of the use of those products is what keeps the customer loyal,” Catherine Michel, chief technical officer and founder of Tribold says.

To gain this understanding of the customer experience and optimize product uptake, CSPs should also explore the relationship between customer relationship (CRM) management and product management. Traditionally CRM has been a place to store information about the customer life-cycle and it has been painfully disconnected from the product life-cycle. ISVs have now begun to integrate CRM systems with product management and other systems, such as customer analytics, to provide context and relevancy to customer interactions. The integration of these communications technology products helps CSPs transform their methodology from managing a linear customer life-cycle to a circular customer experience.

“As our customers and partners integrate Microsoft Dynamics CRM with Tribold EPM they are combining best-of-breed product catalog functionality with agile customer relationship management,” adds Margitta.” This provides customers with faster deployment, higher agility, and lower cost of ownership than doing CRM integration and customization from scratch.”

By placing product management at the heart of the customer experience, CSPs can achieve better service adoption but it’s not just a one-way street. They can also centralize product information to gain insights into product performance to better manage, analyze, and adjust their product portfolio. Together, integrated product and customer management provides a unique value proposition for CSPs and superior experience for their customers.

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Survival of the Fittest

In today’s market, competition is not just about competing with the next guy, it’s about survival. It’s about evolution and, to some extent, natural selection. Ultimately, CSPs can only truly distinguish themselves by leveraging their unique technology to develop and deliver innovative products and service their customers can’t live without, and by providing a meaningful and superior customer experience throughout the customer relationship.

By leveraging and integrating communications technology products like product management and CRM, CSPs are able to harness innovation and connect it directly to customer experience and perhaps that’s the most important advantage of all.