Customer-driven Networks

By: [Matthew Ray](#)

With its roots as a utility, the traditional culture of communications service providers (CSPs) has been to first consider what the network could do, and then monetize it. Service offerings were built on existing capabilities. And for years this worked until—with cloud providers and over-the-top (OTT) providers encroaching on the telecom market—suddenly it did not, with serious impact to both CSPs' revenues and relevance. The legacy, network-centric approach is not attuned to the demands of the enterprise customer, and to the real and emergent pressures of a hyperconnected, always-on world. Cloud providers were born customer-first, and they can deliver what customers want: greater control.

Faced with increasing and evolving customer demands, and under immense competitive pressure, CSPs must make a pivot to attain greater control, visibility, and extensibility. But it's not easy—and the clock is ticking. However, this will require a shift from a network-centric to customer-centric approach, digitizing operations, and simplifying the ever-increasing complexity of network management—all while improving the customer experience (CX). It's a tall order, but with the right tools and approach, this turning point can represent significant opportunity for operators and CSPs of all sizes. In fact, smaller CSPs likely have the agility to use superior CX for a faster, more successful pivot than many of their larger counterparts.

Improving CX with greater control

Today, enterprise customers want more control over their networks than ever before. They want to be able to change direction or locations or buy or sell bandwidth. At a higher level, they want options like going deeper into the network, enabling automation and intelligence-driven decisions that give them agility for present demands and future needs.

Standing in between CSPs and the ability to deliver on the desire for greater customer control is equipment and provisioning that does not expose information beyond a network engineering group. In many cases, CSPs lack the agility, software, and tools to quickly provision services and manage network configurations—and the ability to provide this level of control to their customers.

As a cautionary tale, CSPs need only look to data centers and the entrance of Amazon Web Services (AWS) to the market. AWS gave a new level of control to enterprise customers, enabling them to provision a server, turn up virtual machines, and install applications—all from a desktop without having to perform these functions within a proprietary environment.

This is exactly the type of control that enterprise customers want from their network service providers. They want to manage their network environment without having to involve or wait on the provider's personnel to make the changes for them. They want the agility to increase bandwidth between two locations, for example. They want to execute it and have everything that goes along with it automated, from modification record to billing, without any human involvement on the network side. It's a zero-touch, self-service experience that encompasses automated provisioning, service chaining, data flow, and network management. Enterprise customers are used to and expect that they can make changes themselves and in real time. They want to manage it themselves, as opposed to making a call, opening a ticket, and waiting two days before something can be done. They want control as their business applications or requirements dictate. But ultimately, when your biggest competitors are customer-first, being able to provide greater control is no longer a 'nice to have'—it's a survival imperative.

It's a paradigm shift to take a native network and expose it out in a secure manner to the appropriate personnel at the customer site—and allow them the capability to control it. But it's a necessary shift, because otherwise CSPs risk losing customers to cloud service providers who provide a digital experience—with superior CX—that gives them the control they want. In a highly competitive market, network services are being commoditized, which is driving price erosion. And enterprise customers are looking for that element of control as a deciding factor.

Enabling agility by simplifying complexity

Giving customers more control leads to differentiation and enables better CX, but it goes further. Customer control also unlocks additional business benefits. In addition to enabling CX as a key competitive differentiator, you're also simplifying your business at the same time.

Managing the complexity of customer requests is costly and time-consuming for service providers, so there are upsides to efficiently empowering customers through greater agility and control. Once a customer has these tools and capabilities, they are also far less likely to churn to another service provider that doesn't provide the same control—so there is a new customer stickiness that can ultimately benefit the bottom line. In addition, making the shift to a customer-driven network can help service

providers accelerate revenue, even as prices erode in the market overall. CSPs can create and offer new services quickly and make them instantly available to enterprise customers. They can also up-sell and cross-sell new services enhanced through network and value-added

partnerships, giving customers more options with the advantage of streamlined service delivery through a marketplace providing everything an enterprise customer needs for their existing and new services.

Service providers can also accelerate time to revenue by leveraging greater, end-to-end automation. It's a win-win for CSPs, as it can minimize bottlenecks for both customer and service providers, speeding service delivery and accelerating revenue.

Successfully making the shift to a customer-centric culture hinges upon three things: making customer control and CX central to the organization; using a platform that will make it systematic and enable automation where possible; and becoming a more efficient, optimized company. The end result is happier customers, reduced churn, and the ability to launch new products and offerings quickly as you see opportunities in the market.

It's why CloudSmartz has built Acumen360™, its digital customer experience and marketplace platform solution. Ultimately, Acumen360™ enables CSPs to transform into digital-first service providers to deliver a unified service experience. With Acumen360™, service providers can become a platform for enterprise customers, providing an ecosystem of technologies and bundled services.

One example is how data center providers are benefiting from CloudSmartz's marketplace approach to enable buying and selling of services through the marketplace via APIs (REST APIs and supporting integration standards such as MEF LSO APIs). Services can be bundled, enabling connection points and different levels of service for one or multiple locations. Ultimately, a service provider can offer end-to-end service and last-mile connectivity to any location from the data center in a full package via the marketplace. Instead of buying one thing configuring, waiting, and then another, it's as simple as buy it, connect it, and execute it. This provides far greater value with reduced complexity, and a far better customer experience.

Granular visibility into network management and performance can also help service providers pinpoint opportunities for improvement that can be transformed into upsells. One such example is proactive notifications that provide real-time value. Let's say that a service provider identifies a trend, that the network hits an 80 percent threshold every Sunday and Wednesday at 3:00 pm. The provider may want to boost bandwidth by scheduling an upgrade—and smaller players can realize additional revenue by having the flexibility to scale up and down with business intelligence provided by that analytics piece. This is just one small example but multiply it by dozens or even hundreds of these kinds of opportunities, across thousands of customers, and you begin to see the potential for reducing OPEX, improving CX, and accelerating new revenue opportunities.

Simplifying operations

The ability to elevate CX, digitize operations, and enable new offerings that drive revenue is tantalizing, but the reality of enabling zero touch across the spiderweb of existing CSP systems can pose a challenge. A solution must encompass OSS and BSS, provisioning, network management systems, billing, and more. These are systems that have evolved over years, if not decades, and they may not interface with each other properly.

This complexity makes the shift from network-centric to customer-centric seem daunting. It's where Acumen360™ offers powerful simplification. The Acumen360 platform creates a portal with modules—like SDN and CPQ—that becomes the customer experience. Then it uses API management tools to connect into the different systems on the provider side, get the appropriate data to update the systems, and manage the experience for the business as well as the end customer. This is not a fundamental change to the underlying systems as they are designed to function, but instead it's about bringing greater interoperability as an overlay of systems that integrate in a meaningful way through tools and processes to provide a desired CX outcome. The overlay approach simplifies and optimizes the CSPs' business, and really allows the customer the flexibility they need—but it doesn't enable the customer to change everything.

Giving customers control, digitizing operations, and increasing speed and flexibility for service delivery are all hard, independently. Together they present a next-level challenge. But with competition creeping in, now is the time to make the shift toward a customer-driven network and operations. CSPs ready to take the next step should look for a solution that can provide a foundational platform for network technologies and value-added partners. With it, CSPs can provide a unified service experience—and become a trusted link between enterprise customers and everything they need for business-critical operations.

If you'd like to learn more, you can automatically **book a meeting with CloudSmartz** through *Pipeline*'s business introduction service, or visit the **CloudSmartz website to learn more about Acumen360** and how it helps service providers give customers more control, simplify service delivery, and accelerate revenue.