

Publication : The Edge
Format : Hardcopy
Title : UNOS PRO aims to shake the market
Date : 2 June 2008

UNOS PRO aims to shake the market

With three billion mobile phones in use today, it has become the most personal tool for many people. Most still use it for simple communications, be it voice or text, but business applications are slowly but surely increasing, too. For FSBM Holdings Bhd's multimedia and communications group CEO Michael Ta, the opportunity in the market was clear – everyone wants to pay less for their voice and data calls, especially those who travel overseas or have to communicate with overseas parties or just need to receive their emails on their phones.

The solution, which cropped up over a the tarik session with his chief technology officer, was to come up with a compression technology, for which FSBM has applied for a patent, which reduces by up to 70% the size of a data file. It cannot, however, compress voice calls. According to Ta, the company has spent close to RM5 million in R&D over 18 months. "We have a six-person R&D team in KL which has built a technology platform based on this compression technology. We can now add other services onto this platform which we have branded as UNOS PRO," he says.

With China as a major market for FSBM, UNOS set up a 14-person R&D team in Beijing in April. The team will work to build more applications that will ride on the UNOS platform. For now, its immediate goal is to come up with a Chinese version of UNOS PRO in simplified Chinese. The target is to complete the work by June.

However, the software only works on PDA phones and phones with a software platform called MIDP 2 (Mobile Information Device Profile 2) and which have a browser. Most new phones, though, come with MIDP 2.

Basically, users have to go to the UNOS WAP site to download the application for free. They will receive a separate bill from UNOS based on the calls and data traffic they use. A UNOS inbox on their phone will store all their messages and emails that come through the UNOS system. This separation is necessary as the UNOS software only works with phones which have the UNOS software in them. So, if you receive text and voice messages from a phone without the UNOS software, those messages will sit in your inbox. Naturally, Ta and FSBM are hoping that viral marketing will work in their favour as those who have the software will be keen to add as many friends and family members onto the network, too.

A key feature is that users will be able to receive emails on their existing phones (assuming the phones are MIDP e-compliant and have a browser) without having to get a Blackberry. Hoping to come up with a catchy phrase that will stick, Ta calls this the virtual Blackberry. In fact, he called FSBM's earlier UNOS Voice, launched last year, the Virtual SIM. This was a consumer-targeted applications, which is still party of UNOS PRO.

A key factor in the success of any new service introduced in the mobile phone arena must be simplicity; some experts refer to this as the 1-2-3 rule. Ta believes FSBM has such a product with UNOS PRO. "For instance, if our customers go to China, all they have to do is to buy a local ISM started pack and send a message to our network in Malaysia, which will then recognize that they are now using a different number in that country. Calls to their regular mobile number will be routed to the new SIM," says Ta.

The UNOS software will convert the call originating from Malaysia into a local call originating in China, thus saving the users money. Similarly, the UNOS software will convert the call originating from China into a call originating in Malaysia. UNOS is able to do this as it buys whole-sale minutes from operators in China and Malaysia and is basically reselling these minutes to its customers. It will charge 79 sen to send an receive calls in China, offering huge savings over the estimated RM3.60 for inbound and RM9 for outbound international charges for a Malaysian mobile. If that sounds suspiciously like a VoIP (voice-over-Internet protocol) operator, then it is but with an obvious value-added twist where data and email are concerned.

But these savings are not what lie at the heart of the main value proposition offered by FSBM. UNOS is Latin for "one" and with this service, Ta says customers can be reached via the same phone number no matter where they are in the world.

Ta says he is not looking to take away business from mobile operators but has created a platform to improve data usage. It remains to be seen if the mobile operators see it that way. FSBM expects an annual 20% boost from UNOS PRO to the communications business, which contributes between RM10 million and RM12 million annually to group revenue.