DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION

Local operators are turning to digital transformation as they look to keep pace with changing customer demand and the spiralling complexity of service delivery

Telecom operators have been talking about seamless customer service, stemming from a unified view of the customer for the last 20 years. The ambitious scope of such projects has remained out of reach for many operators. However, with customers becoming more demanding and the scope of expected services more diverse, local operators must transform their internal processes and technology stack in order to rapidly deliver services not to just consumers, but distributors and digital service providers. According to Atul Madan, EVP, & COO, digital content and BSS, Comviva, the vendor is offering operators a digital transformation roadmap.

CommsMEA: How is Comviva helping telcos digitally transform their businesses?

Atul Madan: We look at digital transformation from three different stakeholders' point of view. One, the digital service partners; from on-boarding to service delivery to the customer. Second are the distribution partners in retail and the distribution chain, and third are the customers.

All of these stakeholders require a uniform experience, which helps them understand what is on offer and how they can either opt in or provide different services.

CommsMEA: From a digital service provider perspective, what does this mean?

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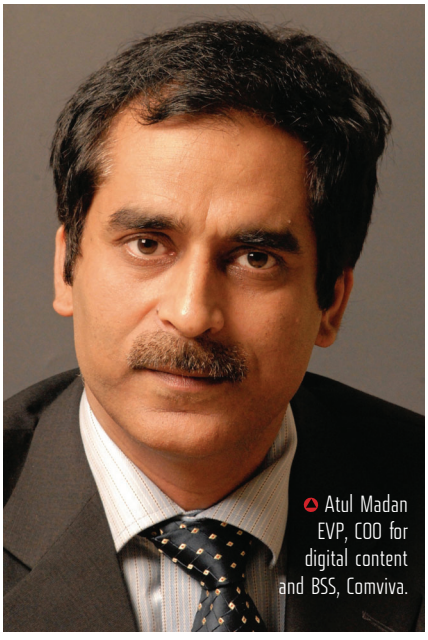

Atul Madan EVP, COO for digital content and BSS, Comviva.

Madan: Operators want to on-board more and more digital service partners, so they really need a robust and flexible enough partner on-boarding system. The moment they on-board partners, operators want those services to be offered to consumers. This process is becoming more complex because there are so many partners and the services they offer are becoming more complex.

Initially, it was partners in the entertainment space, but now there are players offering travel-based services, or healthcare services. And there are other industries coming in as [the market] moves towards smart home experiences; so there is the energy industry and security industry.

[Operators] need to take all these services and offer a simple-to-understand service to consumers.

CommsMEA: How should telcos be looking at digital transformation from a customer service perspective?

Madan: Operators still have traditional legacy interfaces, like SMS, [interactive voice response] or basic web-based services through which they are reaching out to consumers.

[Now] social media is becoming more important and operators have to ask how they can start acquiring customers via social media, and not just use it as a tool to promote its services.

CommsMEA: So operators need to move towards social commerce…

Madan: It is not just about promoting a service on social media, but whether a customer can pay for a product using a seamless interface. So the subscription management system and the lifecycle management system have to be interfaced to enable on-boarding of customers.

Then there is servicing customers. Today, customers go on Twitter and complain. Rather than use another channel, like phone or email, to handle the complaint, operators need to 'close the loop' on the same platform where the complaint originated.

So your [customer relationship management] system has to accommodate that; your on-boarding, your product catalogue system, your subscription management system, all the management systems.

Your [business support system] stack has to be interfaced with social media to complete the loop for all these aspects.

Also your content distribution systems have to be enabled to distribute the content through these new interfaces. Of late, there is Amazon Alexa and Google Homes. These things have also started to become important.

CommsMEA: What about the distribution chain partners?

Madan: The question is with more com-

plexity and competition, how do [operators] use their distribution channels more effectively and in real time? So how do they do real time interventions in case they want to launch a product? Or how do they disseminate information to retailers in remote areas? Or what kind of incentive plans are there for retailers, or how does it help the customer? [Operators] need to integrate that interface to take care of today's modern distribution chains.

CommsMEA: What aspects of the digital transformation process are proving most challenging for local operators?

Madan: I would say there is no single challenge. In some cases, it's data migration that becomes a challenge. In other cases it is about cleaning the existing data, which may not be in the right form or shape. When I say cleaning data, it could be subscriber data, it could be service data, it could even be content data.

CommsMEA: Where are local telecom operators on this digital transformation roadmap?

Madan: Very few operators are going for full-scale transformation. Initially, most of the operators start with this narrative that they will transform the whole thing. But even if they go ahead with that, it becomes a multi-year project and it's actually divided in phases.

It makes no sense for [an operator] to just transform the whole thing without knowing what the outcomes will be. So they're breaking [digital transformation] into multiple phases. Some [telcos] go with the BSS components first', or [another] is more interested in an OTT play, so they go into partner management systems or the content delivery systems.

Greenfield operators typically try to implement the whole thing in one go because they are not carrying any legacy systems.

The third option, which some of the operators have started choosing, is an overlay of services or technology on top of their legacy systems to minimise the disruption.

CommsMEA: How has the digital transformation conversation evolved?

Madan: There's a fair bit of work which has happened, but most operators have not reached a very significant level of transformation. They are in the process of bringing in those pieces, which are relevant to their market.

It's still a work in progress... some changes are forced upon them by whatever was happening in the immediate ecosystem, whether it is OTT, or it is technology advances due to market competition.

Operators in Middle East have traditionally shown the way. If I compare, let's say 10 years ago, it was probably operators in Southeast Asia where it started first and then Africa picked up. In digital transformation, Middle East operators have gone far ahead of operators in other regions.

CommsMEA: How is Comviva helping organisations change the business culture to embrace digital transformation?

Madan: Some operators are bringing in the technology, which supports our 'as-is' processes, which minimises disruption in the first phase. The second phase typically is 'to-be' processes.'

Operators should spend six months or so defining the to-be processes, along with the vendors they're working with. That means the vendors also have to bring in new practices. Then some kind of automation is required because when you change processes, you should try to reduce manual intervention.

CommsMEA: Which organisations in the region have successfully adopted OSS and BSS models to drive change?

Madan: I will not be able to name the [companies], but we're working in almost every country, in Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Jordan, Oman and the UAE. And we are also planning something in Bahrain.

We have been working with different operators, but no operator has completed 100% transformation.

CommsMEA: What's the priority for Middle East operators?

Madan: Everybody starts with the unified customer experience. But eventually, what they end up doing is the digital service partner aspect. But the starting point, the trigger for everybody is unified customer experience.

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CommsMEA: OK – is that because unified customer experience is the trickiest part?

Madan: It is a bit tricky, for sure. Eventually what happens is when the deployment starts it's more towards supporting the digital services partners. I think their internal ecosystems are better able to support those partners first.

CommsMEA: How is Comviva trying to simplify building the unified customer interface for a lot of operators?

Madan: Comviva has been in existence for more than 20 years, and we have developed technologies for different interfaces over that time. Whether it is SMS, wireless, USSD, WAP or app. We have the technology experience. We have products for all these things. Maybe five years back, all of these were disparate point products, which we were selling. Once the unified experience started coming in, we created overlaying interfaces to create a similar experience for the customer.

CommsMEA: What are the biggest hurdles when it comes to digital transformation within telecoms?

Madan: There are many. One is the cost of digital transformation; it is high.

Second, the disruption it can bring into the overall environment means it is something that people are still not fully sure about.

Third is the need for a digital transformation officer who brings the CIO, CTO, CFO and CMO onto the same page with varying KPIs. That slows down the whole process. It is a challenge to align different functions around a common business objective.