

Bytemobile, Opera in Duet

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Even as wireless operators and handset manufacturers put out increasingly powerful and visually appealing devices with an array of new mobile services, users are looking for ways to gain access to more content on their existing mobile phones. Those two threads could be joined today by a joint announcement from Bytemobile Inc. and Opera Software ASA , which will collaborate on a new infrastructure to deliver Web content to conventional cell phones. (See Bytemobile, Opera Team.)

Known as the Unison Content Adaptation Service, the new system is "the first carrier-grade, commercial infrastructure solution for full-HTML Internet access on feature phones and other mass-market mobile handsets," the companies claim. If it lives up to its developers' billing, it will open up the full universe of the Internet to device users previously restricted to WAP browsers, "walled-garden" carrier portals, and limited Internet surfing on "down-sized" sites. Founded in 2000 and headquartered in Mountain View, Calif., Bytemobile is among the leaders in content optimization services for network operators, using techniques like data compression, protocol acceleration, and caching to speed delivery times, reduce or eliminate latency, and increase the effective bandwidth available to users and content producers. The company says it has 70 operator customers in 35 countries, including major wireless carriers Cingular Wireless LLC , Sprint Nextel Corp. (NYSE: S - message board), and T-Mobile USA . (See Bytemobile Swallows ProQuent.)

"We sell directly to 80 percent of our customers," says Bytemobile vice president of marketing and business development Adrian Hall, "and they've been asking us to continue to develop solutions that will allow their customers to be able to surf and use browsing facilities on standard phones with a browser, rather than just on smartphones and with access only to portal content."

Combining Bytemobile's content adaptation platform with the Opera Mini mobile browser, Unison will use Opera Mini's content transcoding technology along with Bytemobile's ability to compress, accelerate, and dynamically cache content. Because the new platform resides in the carrier network, it does not require the downloading of client software to the device -- which, as Hall points out, has been a major barrier to the adoption of advanced Web-based services on conventional phones.

Since it was introduced by Oslo-based Opera just over a year ago, Opera Mini has been downloaded by more than 10 million users, the company says. Designed to work with almost any mobile phone, including the popular BlackBerry Pearl and the RAZR from Motorola Inc. (NYSE: MOT - message board), Opera Mini has still been limited by the capacity of whichever carrier network the user subscribes to.

Combining the power and efficiency of Bytemobile's content optimization software with the popular Mini browser, says Ajit Jaokar, CEO of FutureText and author of the book *Open Gardens: The Innovator's Guide to the Mobile Data Industry*, could help solve one of the carriers' biggest looming problems: declining average revenue per user (ARPU). "Offering full Web access to subscribers drives more revenue for the mobile operator," Jaokar remarks. "It becomes a win-win proposition for everyone."

At the same time, the partnership with Bytemobile gives Opera an entrée into the carrier systems it lacked before.

"They've had a hosted-only solution, and they didn't have a way to get into the operators' networks," explains Bytemobile's Hall. "This is a way to increase the size and depth of their installed base."

The move toward a unified Web services platform puts Bytemobile, a relatively small player with just 150 employees, in the path of an oncoming train: Ericsson AB (Nasdaq: ERIC - message board), the world's No. 1 wireless infrastructure provider, which has made no secret of its intention to move from a vendor of Big Iron to becoming a supplier of IP-based mobile services to both carriers and enterprises worldwide.

The Unison platform will be available commercially in June.

â€” Richard Martin, Senior Editor, Unstrung