

ODPs Practice Usability

By Monica Allevan

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The race is on to provide the best user “view” for Internet-capable mobile devices.

The on-device portal (ODP) industry represents a relatively new market, even though some of its members have been around for years. But things are starting to heat up.

Handmark already is outgrowing the office space it moved into in Kansas City, Mo., earlier this year. Bellevue, Wash.–based Action Engine is hooking up with more brands, such as MSNBC.com, and expects to line up about 10 major brands before the end of the year. And over the summer, U.K.-based SurfKitchen saw the first fully integrated launch of its portal with a mobile operator in Malaysia.

But the smaller ODP companies admit they’re up against some fairly hefty competition – in the likes of Google and Yahoo!

“Yeah,” says Action Engine President and CEO Scott Silk, “but we’re competing with a 7-year advantage.”

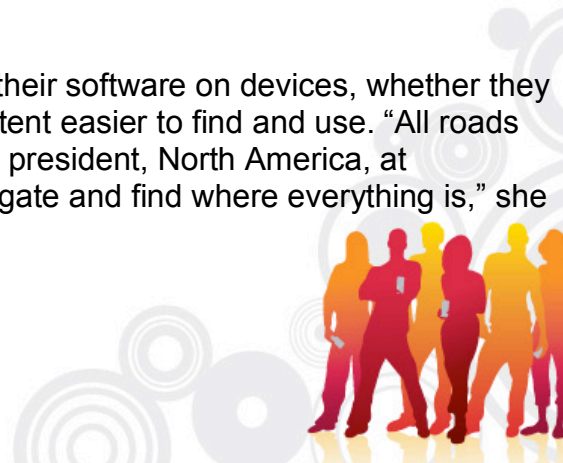
And all that press surrounding the Apple iPhone, which also could be considered an ODP? It put the concept of data front and center. “That just helps,” he says.

There are other types of competitors as well. On a broader scale, Bytemobile works with content companies and operators to improve mobile data services, but it’s coming from the network side and working with browser companies, such as Opera Software and Access, to embed the technology on new handsets. By working with Bytemobile, “there’s really no reason they [carriers] need to develop an ODP strategy,” says Adrian Hall, vice president of marketing and business development at Bytemobile.

Operators like to hear Bytemobile’s proposition because it addresses the issue at the network level, without having to configure solutions for dozens of different cell phone models. “We don’t have to work with each handset manufacturer,” Hall says. “That’s what the operators love. They get to market quicker.”

EASE OF USE

Still, ODPs are investing a great deal of time and effort to get their software on devices, whether they be new or existing handsets. At the crux of it all is making content easier to find and use. “All roads always lead back to usability,” says Tracy Allard, regional vice president, North America, at SurfKitchen. “There’s a lot of onus on the subscriber to investigate and find where everything is,” she



says. The goal is to bring the silos together on the device, so the user gets a common experience and spends less time moving back and forth to find music, video and other apps, like search.

Action Engine, which claims to have developed the first ODP, spent its early years primarily on R&D. The market started to take off in 2006, when Action Engine was selected by TiVo as the technology provider behind the TiVo Mobile entertainment service. It was a watershed moment of sorts for Action Engine, Silk says.

The company originally was calling on carriers. But when the big brands started calling Action Engine, the company decided to ink deals with the media companies first, rather than trying to fly solo at the wireless operator level. That doesn't mean Action Engine isn't working with carriers, and if asked who is going to lead the mobile content market – the content companies or the mobile operators – “we're putting a chip on both,” Silk says. However, he notes that the content companies are making the first, more aggressive moves.

Part of Action Engine's expertise lies in its ability to work with hundreds of different phone models, something media companies sometimes find out the hard way.

EXPANSION

Handmark is not sitting idle, either. The company is in a phase where its business is rapidly building, and it has grown from a few dozen employees to what will probably be about 150 by the end of this year, according to Douglas Edwards, co-founder and chief marketing officer.

Handmark is expanding into the United Kingdom as well and is managing a number of initiatives, both for Pocket Express as well as user interfaces (UIs) designed for specific operators. The company has seen “spectacular” success with the uptake of its latest travel services, particularly on BlackBerry devices, including the more consumer-oriented Pearl and Curve, Edwards says.

A frequent traveler, Edwards found himself using the flight service over the summer as so many flights were delayed or postponed. In fact, Handmark even used it to get its CEO to a board meeting in New York on time. The travel features include free access to schedules for more than 75,000 departures from 3,500 airports around the world. The flight data is licensed from the Official Airlines Guide (OAG) and includes updated flight status with on-time or delay times, gate and terminal details.

In addition, Handmark offers a \$10 “elite” subscription of Pocket Express, where consumers can get 24-hour access to help anywhere in the world through the MobileCierge service. Edwards uses it himself. For instance, while attending the 3GSM World Congress in Barcelona last February, he arranged for a cab to make sure he made it to an early morning flight. Another colleague used the service to deliver the right flowers to his wife.



Handmark provides both a consumer service and technology sales, so it is in a fairly unique position and embraces the rest of the value chain in a way that Google doesn't, according to Edwards. "We play nice with everybody," he says, adding the company is happy to share revenues with its partners.

PERSONALIZATION

For SurfKitchen, it's all about personalization for the subscriber and customization of the device for the operator. As Allard explains, SurfKitchen doesn't provide the data content, but it makes it work.

The first carrier to bring the SurfKitchen story all together is Maxis in Malaysia, where the operator earlier this year launched an integrated mobile content services portal based on SurfKitchen's Surfkit Desktop product. The portal, called myMaxis, consolidates Maxis' service portfolio within a single interface. The portal's home screen helps publicize services, and the home page includes a news ticker, three ads highlighting new content and icons leading to seven services, from mobile TV to music and games. Branding, content and ads are managed through over-the-air (OTA) updates.

Mobile advertising is part of the game as well. Like Action Engine and Handmark, SurfKitchen is integrating advertising into the mix. "We are a great enabler of contextual advertising in an unobtrusive manner," Allard says. Handmark recently opened a New York office devoted to working with media for mobile ad placement.

