

Watching better TV on the go

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Published July 11, 2011

(SINGAPORE) The ability to reach new users through mobile TV has been a prospect dangled by telcos for the past few years.

It holds the promise of courting a TV audience that has become increasingly drawn to mobile devices for entertainment, and who no longer want to be chained to one location to watch TV.

Furthermore, it also offers them a way to challenge traditional broadcasters which use digital video broadcasting (DVB) standards to reach devices, while telcos want to use their own mobile data networks to stream media while packing in advertisements on top of that.

But that mobile TV ideal has been fraught with various challenges, one of which is unreliable playback compared with DVB, which is cheaper for mass broadcast transmission.

Data streaming requires a connection to each device tapping in, so a network can be quickly overwhelmed by a large group of users tuning in.

One Singapore-based start-up, however, is planning to use its unique technology to make mobile Internet protocol television (IPTV) a reality.

Sandeep Casi, founder and CEO of Cinemacraft, told BizIT that the solution to the problem lies in two parts of the puzzle that his company can provide. One is its proprietary video compression technology.

Cinemacraft is a recent spin-off of the MPEG-2 encoding technology from Japanese firm, Custom Technology. MPEG-2 is a widely used format for digital television that is found in DVDs, as well as for broadcast over satellite and cable TV.

Under Custom Technology, Cinemacraft was so successful that about half the world's DVDs are authored with the technology, Mr Casi said.

He said that the video compression is good enough to deliver a watchable stream at very low bitrates, thus opening up markets such as Indonesia and India where cellular data speeds may not be as fast as they are in developed markets.

In India, there are 170 million TVs against 800 million mobile devices, he said, adding: 'A big part of the market relies on mobile devices for entertainment.'

The second piece of technology is a robust cloud platform for advertisers as well as content providers.

Cinemacraft, which has a team of four engineers in Singapore, is focusing its efforts here to optimise the platform for streaming media.

The platform will use Amazon's cloud data centre located in the country. Mr Casi said that Singapore was picked because of its proximity to regional emerging markets that the company first intends to target.

But it isn't just the emerging markets that hold potential, he said. Developed markets that have more robust connectivity are possible targets for interactive TV.

'People aren't consuming content passively these days. We're looking at tablet devices as delivery channels, and that's how users want their TV now,' he said.

The company plans to rope in advertisers at the beginning to overlay banner ads on top of its streaming video. Eventually, it plans to begin ad syndication where a content provider can stream ads to devices through Cinemacraft's platform.

The path to creating this video on demand portal for Asia has seen the company start to court media companies such as Sony Entertainment to bring their content to Cinemacraft.

Still, the kinks in the system need to be worked out with content producers and distributors, as well as telcos themselves – a potentially sticky conversation revolving around revenue generation.

'Telcos in the emerging markets are the gatekeepers of the ecosystem, and you need to work with them. Also, through advertising, we are trying to crack the problem of how content (owners) make enough money (through mobile distribution),' Mr Casi said.