

The Future of Communications

The Future of Communications conference took place in London on May 29 at London's Café Royal

Sir Mike Rake, chairman of BT



As commuters bustled past the Café Royal, checking e-mails on Blackberries, demanding directions from iPhone SatNavs or texting the office to say they're running late, they were oblivious to the fact that some of the most influential figures in the communications industry had assembled at the London landmark to discuss the future of their communications.

Above right: John Fairbrother

Right: Houston Spencer; and far right: Mark Curtis



The chairman of BT, Sir Mike Rake, welcomed delegates to an interactive and thought-provoking event which opened many cans of worms and reinforced the fact that all participants in communications need to seriously examine their role and their future.

Drawing the line

Tudor Aw, a partner with consultants KPMG, described the world of content and delivery as a complex ecosystem. "It used to be very clear who was responsible for what. Now we're seeing more blurring of these verticals, with everyone operating in each other's space." For example, take a band. They may create the music content, run their own site and take payments on line.

It's hard to work out who's a friend and who's an enemy, so everyone now, should be treated as a 'frienemy', he warned.

The content customer

With the proliferation of delivery mechanisms and of user gen-





erated content (UGC), understanding what makes the customer tick is both harder and more important. "The new world is coming and no-one is moving," warned Dominique Le Foll, VP of engineering, Amino Communication. Unless the industry is prepared to do the research and find out, for example, who switches off what content, when and why, then how can it market to them, he pointed out? And how can advertisers know that their investment is adequately targeted?

Monetisation

Monetisation as a topic ran throughout the day, warranting its own session in the afternoon, where panellists discussed how to integrate telecoms, media, advertising and brand marketing. How revenues could be extracted from the big brand budget rather than subscribers was a major issue.

For Mark Curtis, VP of engineering, Flirtomatic, the art is not to put off consumers with pricing. His company had tried encouraging subscriptions with free offers and free trials to little effect. The insight gained from this was 'don't put customers off with pricing'. He likened it to a pub. "You can go in for a chat and no-one will charge you for it. But if you want a drink you'll buy a pint. Or if you want to play on the gaming machine you'll have to pay," he said.

Big business was already seen to be tapping into the advent of social networking. Banks in particular were recognised in this respect.

The mobile was viewed as maintaining a pivotal role in revenues. Flirtomatic's Curtis, for example, said that his company takes three times the amount of money from customers on the mobile than on the web: "The phone is going to become a wallet."



FUTURE OF COMMUNICATIONS CONFERENCE

Session Programme

Keynote address

Sir Mike Rake, chairman, BT Group PLC

Content

- Houston Spencer, VP Business Strategy & Marketing, Alcatel-Lucent
- Dominique Le Foll, VP of Engineering, Amino Communication
- John Yeomans, director, First Capital 7 Stream UK
- Neil Fairbrother, director, Pod3 TV

Social Networking

- Peter Cochrane, Consultant, Cochrane Associates Global
- Mark Curtis, VP of Engineering, Flirtomatic
- Antonio Vince Staybl, SEd and founder, itsmy.com
- Tudor Aw, partner, KPMG

Futurologists Panel

- Ian Neild, Futurologist, BT
- Peter Cochrane, consultant, Cochrane Associates
- Ian Pearson, futurologist, Futurizon

Advertising & Marketing Session

- Patrick Parodi, CMO & general manager EMEA, Amobee
- Giles Rhys Jones, director, OgilvyOne
- Jim Brooks, principal associate consultant, Capgemini
- Christian Goswami, director, Openwave Systems

Fixed Mobile Convergence/High Speed Mobile

- Professor Ed Candy, chief technology officer, 3 Group
- Andy Stevenson, CEO, Fujitsu Telecommunications
- Philip Grannum, director product development, Cable & Wireless
- Professor Simon Saunders, chairman & Ofcom Spectrum Advisory Board
- David Marshall, marketing manager, Plantronics

Left: Professor Ed Candy

Delegates were encouraged to raise pertinent questions from the floor

Throughout the conference, delegates were busy networking for future contacts and also renewing old acquaintanceships



Convergence – a red herring?

When convergence was opened up for discussion, the topic of bundling and billing was raised. For Peter Cochrane, nothing is coming together other than billing, ‘which is about as exciting as a chair leg’: “I see a lot of collapse and a lot of divergence.”

Faster delivery

Consumer demand is for ‘more, faster, cheaper, better’, according to Pod3’s Neil Fairbrother. “If we’re really serious about delivering HD, we’ve got to get off copper and deliver fibre as quickly as possible,” he said.

Fibre to the home (FTTH) was – not surprisingly – a hot topic. The US was put up as a model, but as Alcatel-Lucent’s Houston Spencer pointed out, in the States there are no regulations demanding that they share cables.

Peter Cochrane, for one, believes that there is a business model which works: “Twenty one years ago I wrote a business case for fibre to the home – it made sense then and it still does now,” he said.

Fixed Mobile Convergence was discussed in detail by major

player 3Group, Femto Forum, Fujitsu Telecommunications and Plantronics. Again, revenue opportunities came to the fore, and the future of technologies such as WiMax came under scrutiny in the light of developments in the wireless market.

The future beckons

Listening to the discussions from the Futurologists panel, it became clear that Arthur C. Clarke’s *2001: A Space Odyssey* is close to shifting from ‘science fiction’ to science fact. For the uninitiated, Hal, the sentient on-board computer of the spaceship Discovery, has artificial intelligence. To break his megalomaniac control of the ship, he has to be persuaded through an intense logical argument and philosophical debate that Hal must kill himself.

It has come to the point where programming has become so sophisticated that the programmed machines must take over the programming. At some point, argued the Panel, they’ll supercede humans and design their own offspring.

“Are we going to take our computer for a walk in the park, or will it take us out for a walk?” posed BT Futurologist Ian Neild.