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OPINION · NETWORK ASSURANCE

Preparedness, not prediction

Why the lessons retailers are learning about pricing pressure are just as relevant to the connectivity industry.

> **But saying your network performs is one thing. Being able to prove it is quite another.**

I spend most of my time working in connectivity, looking at network performance, service delivery and, more often than we'd like, dealing with the consequences when something doesn't work as it should.

So, when I recently read Revionics' *Pricing in the Pressure Zone*, I wasn't expecting to find so many parallels with our industry. But the more I read, the more familiar it became.

The article looks at the challenges facing retail pricing teams: rising costs, increasingly price-conscious consumers and an unpredictable market where the next disruption could come from almost anywhere. Its central message is a simple one: preparedness matters more than prediction.

I think the connectivity industry has a lot to learn from that.

We operate in an environment where customers expect more, margins are under pressure and the complexity of delivering reliable connectivity continues to increase. We are also dealing with an industry where providers make increasingly similar promises, but where proving the actual quality of service is another matter entirely.

There are four lessons from the retail pricing world that I believe translate particularly well to network operators and service providers.

1. You can't predict the next problem, but you can be prepared for it.

Retailers who successfully manage sudden cost increases aren't necessarily the ones who predicted them. They're the ones who have the right information, processes and tools in place to respond quickly.

Connectivity is no different.

We don't know which circuit will deteriorate next month, which carrier will experience an issue or which customer site will suddenly lose service. What we can control is how prepared we are when it happens.

Too often, we are still reacting to problems after the customer has reported them. Teams are pulling together information from different platforms, comparing graphs, chasing carriers and trying to establish exactly when an issue started.

By that point, valuable time has already been lost.

Having continuous, reliable and time-stamped performance data changes that conversation. Instead of spending hours establishing what happened, teams can focus on

what needs to happen next.

It's the difference between managing a problem and simply responding to one.

2. The biggest problems are often hidden in the smallest details.

One of the points made in the Revionics article is that macroeconomic pressures ultimately become individual shelf-level problems. A national increase in costs doesn't affect every product or store in exactly the same way.

The same principle applies to connectivity.

An estate might report 99.9% availability, but that doesn't tell the whole story. One retail branch might be unable to process card payments. One site might have persistent wireless degradation. One customer operating from a shared building might be experiencing completely different performance from another tenant.

Averages can be very misleading.

We need to move away from looking at connectivity purely through estate-wide or network-wide statistics and start understanding what is happening at an individual site, circuit and service level.

Because ultimately, that's where the customer experiences the service. And that's where the evidence needs to be.

3. A one-size-fits-all approach rarely delivers the right result.

The retail pricing article highlights the danger of applying blanket price increases across an entire product range. Not every product, customer or market behaves in the same way, so decisions need to be based on accurate information rather than broad assumptions.

Again, connectivity has exactly the same challenge.

We still see providers relying on standardised SLA reporting, monthly service credits calculated through spreadsheets and lengthy discussions about whether a service has actually breached its agreed performance levels.

In some cases, a ticket is closed as 'no fault found' when the customer is still experiencing the problem.

This isn't good enough.

If we are going to hold carriers and service providers accountable for the connectivity they deliver, we need to be able to demonstrate performance at an individual circuit level.

That means having consistent measurement, clearly defined rules and evidence that can be independently reviewed.

It also means removing the subjectivity from SLA calculations. The same data, measured against the same agreed rules, should produce the same result every time.

This isn't about creating more administration. It's about making the process fairer, faster and considerably more transparent for everyone involved.

4. AI has a role to play, but it shouldn't replace accountability.

The final lesson is perhaps the most interesting.

With thousands of products, channels and constantly changing market conditions, retailers simply cannot make every decision manually. AI is increasingly being used to identify risks, highlight opportunities and recommend actions.

I believe connectivity is heading in exactly the same direction.

AI can help us identify patterns, recognise deteriorating performance and highlight potential failures before they become customer-impacting incidents. It can give operations teams visibility they simply couldn't achieve by looking at individual dashboards and reports.

But there is an important distinction between using AI to predict and recommend, and using it to make decisions that have a direct commercial impact.

When it comes to measuring service performance, calculating SLA breaches or determining what a customer or carrier should be charged, the underlying evidence has to be reliable and repeatable.

Prediction and measurement are two different things. We need both, but we shouldn't confuse them.

AI should make our teams better informed and more proactive. It shouldn't remove accountability from the people responsible for the decisions.

The bigger picture

What struck me most about the Revionics article was how many of the challenges it describes come back to the same fundamental issue: making decisions without having the right information, at the right level of detail, at the right time.

Replace the word pricing with service assurance and the argument is almost identical.

Connectivity is becoming increasingly commoditised. Customers are more demanding, margins are under pressure and almost every provider claims to offer exceptional network performance.

But saying your network performs is one thing. Being able to prove it is quite another.

I believe the providers who will differentiate themselves over the next few years won't necessarily be those with the biggest networks or the most ambitious promises. They will be the ones who have the visibility, intelligence and evidence to demonstrate exactly what they are delivering.

This is very much the thinking behind what we are developing at XVOLV.

Beacon provides visibility and predictive intelligence across wireless connectivity. Link gives us insight into wireline performance, while Parallax brings the evidence together to provide consistent, deterministic service assurance.

Our objective isn't simply to tell customers when something has gone wrong. It's to help them understand what is happening, anticipate what might happen next and, importantly, have the evidence to support the decisions they make.

We can't predict every disruption the industry will face. Nobody can.

But we can make sure we are better prepared to deal with it.

And I think that's where the real opportunity lies.

With thanks to Revionics, whose article "Pricing in the Pressure Zone" prompted this piece.