



EXPERT OPINION:

IMS: A very definite Maybe

I've talked with several executives at different service providers about IMS, and their views of its worthiness vary wildly. Some consider it the best way to truly deliver a wide range of IP services and operational efficiencies demanded by highly competitive environments. Others would give up their first born children rather than deploy it.

The latter group regards IMS as needlessly complex, costly, element-oriented, and prone to interoperability issues — promoted by network equipment manufacturers focused on IP evolution. It would be easy to say the truth lies somewhere near the middle, but things are more complicated.

IMS is not always the 'best' way to deliver IP services, but it is the only structured and standardised service delivery platform that currently exists. Is that any reason to adopt it?

Your market positioning

My answer is a very definite maybe, depending on a provider's specific marketplace and competitive environment. To be even more precise: you should perhaps adopt it, if only in modified form, tailored to your business needs.

Why? Because many regions are populated with potential customers clamouring for sophisticated new services. If you happen to operate in one of these areas — and if you have innovative competition — you just don't have time to wait for a new standard to emerge or to invent a novel way of implementing each new service. This is especially true in the world of flat-rate billing and exploding IP traffic, where per-bit revenue is plummeting. You need market share and you need it fast, before your competitors grab it.

What can you do about the complexity, cost, and interoperability? These problems can be managed or largely mitigated by offsetting advantages. Take complexity. It is true that at the network element level, IMS may make an all-IP network more complex. If you can't manage the network effectively, services will degrade, customers will churn, and your early-to-market efforts will have been for naught.

By 'effectively', I mean managed with tools that are comprehensive, actually work, and do not require a stable of highly-paid geniuses to operate. But such tools exist, and an IMS network can be cost-effectively managed. At the service design level, IMS actually simplifies and accelerates the introduction of new services. Since IMS already exists as a structured and standardised way of delivering services, you need not start from scratch — ie, with different protocols, a different service API, etc — every time you use it to build a service.

IMS offers savings too

As for costs: there is indeed an upfront capital outlay, but IMS can save on CapEx and OpEx over the long term. By easing the introduction of services, you save on OpEx. Also, since IMS is not tied to a specific access method, you can build a single 'converged' network that is accessible by multiple methods — 3G, cable, LTE, and so on. Hence, you will only need to buy equipment for one network, worry about one infrastructure, hire and train one network management team, and purchase one OSS. In this case, "one" means "less expensive."

Since IMS provides a signalling environment for delivering services but does not define how a service must look, it is not surprising that multiple providers delivering multiple services will give rise to interoperability issues. Flexibility comes at a price. But there are very effective, proven solutions on the market that allow carriers to perform interoperability testing and adjust their services accordingly.

So, for those of you who operate in a competitive, sophisticated marketplace, I suggest you keep your first born, bite the bullet and deploy IMS. Tweak and extend it to suit your needs, but get yourself to market.

"You just don't have time to wait for a new standard to emerge."

– Paul Gowans, Agilent Technologies



The author is Paul Gowans, field marketing manager, Network Solutions Division, within Agilent Technologies' Electronic Measurements Group

CapEx: Capital Expenditure

IMS: IP Multimedia Subsystem

LTE: Long Term Evolution

OpEx: Operating Expenditure

OSS: Operations Support System