

# ScreenPlays

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## MSOs Close in on Mass Leap To OCAP as Answer to IPTV

*Quiet, Steady Progress Toward Rollout of new Interoperable ITV Platform Bodes well for MSOs' Ability to Compete*

By FRED DAWSON

To judge by recent publicity or the lack thereof this “year of OCAP” in cable is winding down without a lot of ballyhoo heralding wide-scale rollouts of the interactive TV platform. But don’t be fooled.

OCAP, the OpenCable Applications Platform, is the cable industry’s standardized client software or middleware for set-tops, TV sets and other digital cable devices that’s meant to foster development of applications that can run on all industry-certified devices. The work is laborious, but all signs suggest the slow-but-steady progress underway among cable MSOs of every description will soon produce the unveiling of an interoperable environment for ITV applications across a market footprint that will dwarf the scale of IPTV for some time to come.

“Right now virtually every company in the cable industry is on the verge or in the midst of deploying OCAP,” says Walden Miller, vice president of engineering services and a co-founder of Vidiom Systems, a pioneering developer of OCAP software. “They’re comfortable that the technology is ready to move into the marketplace.”

Vidiom has taken major steps to accommodate OCAP activity, including creation of an OCAP device and application test lab at its facilities near Boulder, Colo., the launch of an OCAP application developer program and, most recently, inauguration of a new integration and development group under the leadership of Jeff Berenson, now a vice president of Vidiom after long experience in ITV integration with companies such as OpenTV and Motorola.

While engineers have made significant headway at the headend-to-set-top integration level, much work remains to be done before OCAP applications can begin running on a wide scale, Berenson notes. “What

hasn’t happened to date with regard to integration involves the work associated with customer care, order entry, provisioning and billing,” he says.

“We play a big role in that,” Berenson adds. “Over the next year there will be heavy integration work associated with the back office and quality assurance components.”

Testing all the strands connecting the OSS and hardware elements is another big piece of what needs to be done. Vidiom’s new test facility is in full operational mode with a steady stream of customers, Miller says. “We’re working with CE manufacturers and MSOs,” he notes.

Clearly, OCAP rollout is a tall order requiring highly focused commitment on the part of MSOs, vendors, programmers and applications developers. The question is, when it’s all said and done, what kind of impact will the endeavor have on the marketplace?

The good news for the cable industry is that a huge volume of digital set-tops now in deployment in the U.S. and Canada have the minimum processing power – eight megabytes of Flash memory and 16 Mbytes of DRAM (Dynamic Random Access Memory) – to handle OCAP’s suite of software components, including the Java Virtual Machine, Java2 Micro Edition Connected Device Configuration, J2ME Personal Basis Profile, Java TV 1.0 applications program interfaces and Java Media Framework, all of which are intrinsic to Videom’s tool kit.

“We don’t know what the true volume is, but I think the numbers are going to be bigger than the assumption is today,” says David Housman, former technology vice president with Charter Communications who is now vice president for strategic initiatives at Vidiom.

Moreover, the industry has made great strides with development of an OCAP-compatible middleware platform for lower-power set-tops known as enhanced TV (eTV), which ensures that applications running on eTV middleware will run on OCAP devices as well. For example, TVWorks, the joint ITV venture owned by Comcast and Cox Communications,

recently entered an agreement with authoring tools supplier Ensequence to establish a simple set of developer tools and application runtime software that will lead to launch of many new service components on installed digital set-tops starting in mid 2007.

It’s anybody’s guess as to how fast the applications will roll once all the pieces are tested and in deployment. One outstanding question is the absence of a server-side standard for the OCAP applications software.



*A trade show demo developed by Vidiom in cooperation with College Sports TV featured this approach to using OCAP to support compelling interactive applications.*

“The issues around deployment on the server side are unresolved,” acknowledges Michael Malcy, vice president of marketing at Vidiom. “It is a concern of the MSOs.”

But, with the client side well understood, it might be left to vendors to implement the server technology that interfaces with OCAP on the assumption some degree of interoperability will necessarily be assured even without a server standard.

Meanwhile, as integration and testing progress, a key step is the migration of the OCAP discussion beyond the engineering community to the marketing and business side of cable, Housman notes. “The marketing and programming people are learning how to leverage this technology to take advantage of the benefits of interoperability,” he says. “The awareness in the programming and applications communities is ultimately what’s required to monetize the opportunities.” ■