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Inside: An interview with Tim Spencer, president and CEO at Sigma Systems

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A single point of truth is vital when you're selling digital products and services

Whether you are selling handsets to consumers or complex business products to enterprises, Sigma Systems helps providers ensure they tell the same story across all channels

You know what happens when you try to upgrade your mobile phone. Your provider has a wonderful series of handsets and offers online, but when you go into the store just round the corner from the office, the sales assistant has no idea what you're asking about. The range in the shop is different, and the prices are different.

Confused, you spend your lunch break contacting the phone company's call centre, and so do thousands of others. Your call is clearly important to the operator, because the recorded message keeps telling you so, but when it is answered the agent tells a different story again about what's available.

Tim Spencer, president and CEO of Sigma Systems, knows the story all too well, because he's been helping telecoms companies deliver a consistent message for 20 years.

What you need, he says, is "a single source of truth." That's an IT term that means that there is consistency across all sources of information – and that's very important to operators that are trying to sell their products and services to consumers and business users.

"We manage $150 billion worth of products, with hundreds of millions of subscribers, over 80 tier-one and tier-two operators around the globe," he says.

And in those 20 years, the challenge has increased, because product lifecycle has shrunk. Remember when you acquired your first mobile phone? You probably kept the handset for a number of years, and you didn't change the calling plan with your favoured operator.

Now, the world is faster. There are more phones, more packages, and more offers to handle: customers want change.

It's no better in the enterprise business, either. Companies vary hugely in what they need, and operators need to provide a full range of services in a differing environment – perhaps fibre right to one building, but only copper to another. If a customer wants consistent products in both, that can be a challenge.

At the heart of what Sigma Systems does is the enterprise product catalog.

"We are involved in the supply chains and we help lots of customers think through and streamline the product

Tim Spencer: Helping operators make the transition to digital

creation process," says Spencer. In the past, "product lifecycle management was very disaggregated because products had long lifecycles, and timelines were elongated."

It's changed. "Now we need to focus." Sigma Systems helps its clients with change management, "and how they attack those problems," he adds.

"We've taken a very agile approach, helping them think through a new way of doing things. You need to disassemble the old ways and reassemble the new ways. There's a bit of trial and error but, with competition, carriers have to take an innovative approach. They have to look at how customers buy services."

In the past, he says, "it was top-down from call centres. Now there are more ways to interact, so we are simplifying

those paths."

And here's the crucial point, the challenge that Sigma Systems has to help its clients to get right. "Each one of those channels typically involves different fulfilment systems, and those create different user experiences."

The aim is to bring them all together. "We're trying to consolidate, to make the experience consistent, regardless of the channel you've chosen," he says. Customers have to be able to approach their provider from one or more touch points. "If you take a service from a certain point, you need to provide visibility across the channels."

Spencer lists a roll-call of significant companies that Sigma Systems has worked with, including Vodafone, Orange, Liberty Global, Sky – the UK-based TV and broadband operator – and Cox Communications.

He and his colleagues in the Toronto-based company came out of Bell Canada, Nortel and "the larger integrators, such as Accenture", to set up the business. "We have a lot of experience in carriers, mobile and fixed operators. The genesis of the business was in helping broadband service providers and we expanded as we took on multiple service providers. We have assisted them in the transition to digital. As digital becomes part of everyone's business and social life, we take advantage of that," he says.

"Our solutions are there to simplify the process of selling services to customers. Functionality starts at the beginning of product creation." The central product catalogue governs delivery and activation as well, he notes.

"We started in North America, and our business is still 45% in North America today."

But the rest includes significant business in Europe and South America, and growing business in the Middle East and the Asia Pacific. "We are continuing to grow. We've recorded substantial growth over three to five years and we have shown more than 30% a year growth."

Growth comes from a heavy investment in research and development – carried out in a number of locations across the world – that is focused on helping customers to sell digital products. "We've had organic growth and we have acquired a number of companies over several years."

Investments mean Sigma Systems has been able to grow in different markets. "R&D investment has more than doubled. That is a key focus," he says.

"We work very collaboratively with our customers." Growth has been achieved because "there is a tremendous opportunity" in what Sigma Systems provides, he says: "Customers can get results much faster. Our core value is strong integration."

There is no "rip and replace," he notes. Sigma Systems provides application programming interfaces so its systems "can connect to the existing environment."

One of the most recent customer announcements came at the beginning of June, when the company announced that Vodafone Germany had successfully deployed Sigma Catalog into its new digital order centre, allowing for the quick and reliable creation of personalised product configurations for business customers.

"The product catalogue launch at Vodafone Germany is a significant success for Sigma," says Spencer. "The opportunity to demonstrate the real-time benefits of Sigma Catalog is a testament to the benefits of our market-leading product."

On the enterprise side, "products are more complicated and more tailored, and they are not mass scale like consumer products." But the aim is the same: a single system that enables orders, implementation and activation. This provides "significantly improved accuracy and the ability to introduce new products quickly and cost-effectively," says Spencer. "Sigma Catalog's flexibility in providing enterprise customers with faster and more personalised services was crucial to Vodafone Germany's decision to deploy Sigma software."

Before the company gets to the stage of implementing the catalogue with any operator, "we are very much focused on helping them think through the way they describe their products and services," he says. "There has to be consistency across each of those layers."

That's a polite way of saying that the catalogue has to be the same across all channels and processes. "I've had customers describe how 45%-55%-65% of orders they are quoting for can't be delivered because there is no connection between the different processes. With a single source of information, there is uniformity," he says.

"Orange Belgium has been a customer of ours for a couple of years. It started with a project to bring project lifecycle management to the organisation. They had 15 different data sources for products across the product portfolio." The aim was to bring the company, which used to be Mobistar but has recently been rebranded, into a single catalogue to link into the different systems, including ordering, fulfilment and so on.

"We implemented that single catalogue, and today we manage more than 400 devices and accessories, and 1,600 residential product offerings," says Spencer.

The single point of truth that Sigma Systems offers "provides a one-stop-shop for the information. It increases overall process consistency."

The service covers all channels that Orange Belgium uses to reach its customers, including retail outlets, the web, mobile channels and call centres.

"People want to access their operator in the ways they choose, and they expect consistency across channels."

Behind the scenes, though, it's a challenge: even within the store there are different channels. Take the tablet that operators have in store these days, "so a customer can flip through the choices": that has to be up to date and accurate. So does the digital signage inside the store. "We consolidate the sources, taking data from a centralised location. It used to take months, and now just takes a few minutes. So when the information has to change, it can be done in a second."

Sky "is a big customer," he adds. Sigma Systems has helped the company "reduce the whole time to market by 75% and reduce the cost by 90% – and those are their numbers," he says. "It's an omni-channel sales tool. Many people prefer to go on to the self-service pages."

To summarise the message, "we simplify ordering to fulfilment," says Spencer. That is the single point of truth. [•]