

Vladimir Butenko's CommuniGate Systems offers hosted unified communications services via telecoms operators to 150 million users worldwide. He explains the company's approach

White-label offer brings UC to 150m consumers

Let's start with a question about the history of CommuniGate Systems. When was the company set up and how has it evolved?

Vladimir Butenko: The company was started in 1991 in Cologne, and in those days we were making communications tools for sharing files and devices on the German cable networks. We moved the company HQ to the San Francisco area in 1994 and in late 1998 we moved to developing the first generation of our hosting platform.

Can you summarise your main product lines — and the company's main route to market.

Butenko: CommuniGate Systems provides a hosting platform for delivery of unified communication products. This platform enables operators to deliver communication solutions to small business users in the software-as-a-service model.

Having grown from selling directly to the small and medium business, we have an incredible worldwide reseller and partner network that continues to deliver solutions directly to the SMB market.

Additionally, over the last five years we have signed up more than eight tier-one operators, and more than 250 tier-twos around the world.

Much of the company's expertise appears to be behind the scenes. How many end users are aware of the company's service offerings?

Butenko: We are essentially a white-label offering, so it is unlikely that many of our 150 million end users actually know they are using a CommuniGate Systems product. We believe in providing solutions that improve our customer's brand, positioning and ultimately drive their success.

Unified communications is a term that many have used over the past few years. How would you explain it, simply, to a potential customer and what are its key advantages?

Butenko: The industry is quite confused when it comes to what unified communications actually is. If you speak to one vendor, they will tell you unified communications is an IP PBX with presence and mobile extensions, and another will tell you it's combining email with instant messaging, file-sharing and groupware, and another will tell you contact-centre or call-centre software is an example of UC.

This approach is less unified and more patched-together communications.

We take a pragmatic approach and believe unified communications should be just that. Our solutions integrate messaging, groupware, IP telephony, social networking, video, mobility and much more into one platform. We like to say that our products integrate all forms of communications apart from smoke signals.

Have you been tempted to resume selling direct to enterprises or to SMEs, via an app store or through another channel, or are you settled on your approach via telecoms operators, resellers and partners?

Butenko: We actually do still sell directly to the SME. Our SME-focused products, MessagePlus and VoicePlus, are available for purchase directly from our website, and in some places we distribute our products directly to the business user through software retailers.

Maintaining a direct relationship with SMEs is important for our business, as it ensures the products we deliver are aligned with requirements and not solely on the views and opinions of analysts and market research companies.

What advantages are there for a tier-one or tier-two operator in coming to you for the product?

Butenko: Our products have been designed from the outset to deliver against the SME requirements, in an easy to manage, easy to grow solution.

Instead of starting with a system designed for the large enterprise with a large IT department and scaling down to the SME, we've started by making a platform that is commercially and technically viable for an SME that can scale up to support millions of customers on a very low hardware footprint.

Our solution is one piece of software, with one set of hardware requirements. Compare this to some of the other vendors which require six-to-eight server products, and that's not even a complete solution.

Our footprint for the entire UC experience is smaller than that of the help files of others.

Do you host the applications for them, or can they host the platform on their own infrastructure?

Butenko: As a software vendor we are very flexible with deployment options, and can support both models. A number of our customers have decided to work with our hosting providers to reduce their risk exposure and time to market, and then migrate the service in-house at a later date. We find this approach to be quite pragmatic and it helps our customers prove the value of our solution quickly and easily.

Does the service integrate with other software-as-a-service offerings — and if so can you give examples or details?

Butenko: We provide various open APIs that can be used to integrate our products with virtually any other service you can imagine. To date we have integrated with many different services, including billing, invoicing, CRM, social networking — to name just a few.

These rich and open APIs allow for the all types of clients, from web and desktop, to mobile, IVRs and we've even seen set top box applications too. The UC client we ship, called Pronto!, is fully modular and has an open API that is limited only by the imagination. ■