

Mobile news and events: A portal in your pocket

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There are moments in time that should not be missed. A record-breaking Olympic gold, the concert that defines a musical era or the goal that wins the World Cup. Events that shape our world are rarely forgotten in the archives of time and fondly remembered by those who enjoyed a front row seat.

History in the making now rests comfortably in the palms of our hands. Wherever you are in the world, mobile phones can cross continents and journey through time zones, capturing defining moments as they happen.

Mobile portals give direct mobile access

Millions of people watch sporting and musical events on TV. And now, events are empowered by the web. Internet technology has increased user demand for information, anytime and anywhere. Moreover, it has helped to increase audience numbers and bring viewers a cyber-step closer to the action. Now they are about to get even closer, because the next-generation media also happens to be mobile.

Direct mobile access to events is the latest addition to the media mix, giving users virtual access to action while on the go. With no respect for longitude or latitude, mobile portals are on hand to offer the latest information, entertainment and media services, and the chance to take part – a whole event experience in your pocket – wherever you are in the world. “A mobile portal’s function,” says Mark Murphy, solutions architect at Ericsson, “is to provide a point of entry to a specific content experience. There are many different types of communities who engage in their own type of portal and their own type of experience.”

BOX A, RACE TO THE FINISH



The Volvo Ocean Race, which began in Vigo, Spain, in November 2005, will run over nine legs and five continents before crossing the finish line in Gothenburg, Sweden, in June 2006. From Vigo to Cape Town to Melbourne to Wellington; there are still seven stopovers and four in-port races to go:

Port	Estimated arrival	In-port race	Restart
Rio	March 7	March 25	April 2
Baltimore	April 17	April 29	May 7
New York	May 9	No race	May 11
Portsmouth	May 19	May 29	June 2
Rotterdam	June 7	June 11	June 15
Gothenburg	June 17		

Volvo Ocean Race mobile portal

Murphy recently designed Ericsson’s showcase mobile portal for one of sailing’s toughest challenges, the Volvo Ocean Race (VOR), which is a round-the-world voyage that takes in nine countries and five continents (Box A). The 2005/06 race is an eight-month event that began in Vigo, Spain in November 2005. Navigating the world’s waters, the boats and crews will finally anchor in Gothenburg, Sweden in June 2006. The last time the race was held (in 2001/02) 800 million people followed it on television. This time, people around the world can monitor the adventure live on their mobile phones.

Ericsson is participating in the Volvo Ocean Race both in the water and on dry land. While competing at sea with an ocean-going syndicate, the event gives the company an unrivalled opportunity to reach its customers around the world. At every stopover, Ericsson is taking the opportunity to communicate how its solutions can help to expand the business potential (Figure 1). As the race’s official mobile partner, Ericsson is also hosting the VOR mobile portal, which is packed with exclusive content. Covering this event is a unique opportunity for Ericsson to deliver a complete set of services to mobile consumers around the world for a period of eight months.

Immediacy, interactivity, mobility and adventure

The VOR mobile portal is meant to capture the adventure of an extreme challenge and environment, giving enthusiasts and supporters “firsthand” experience of the action. “It’s about immediacy, interactivity, mobility and adventure,” Murphy says. “When I started work on the mobile portal, I set out to build the end-user experience of the VOR around these four words. That is the promise of the mobile channel.”

Indeed, you don’t have to be onboard to experience the excitement of the Volvo Ocean Race. The mobile portal, launched in conjunction with the start of the event in October 2005, is home to mobile content, applications and services. It makes event information and multimedia content available to mobile users over the course of the race. Fans can conveniently receive SMS and MMS news alerts, stream video clips, read mobile blogs and listen to crew commentary via their mobile phones (Figure 2). “It’s about gathering all the content that the Volvo Ocean Race brings to the web expe-

rience and distributing it to the handset,” Murphy says.

Race organizers were aware of the importance of a mobile channel for the 2005/06 competition. Using Ericsson solutions, they developed an “experience center” to bring web content to life on the mobile screen. By offering race content to another segment – handset users – the mobile portal has thus become a complement to television and internet coverage, as well as a means of broadening the audience over the course of the event.

Mobile portal technology has come to the forefront since the 2001/02 Volvo Ocean Race. “During the past four years,” says Eric Frisk, innovation director, Ericsson Mobility World, “mobile portals have started to generate significant uptake, with sports, music and news being the most popular categories. What is more, it has been shown that mobile channels attract users and enhance web usage.”

Ericsson managed-services solution

The VOR mobile portal is an interactive adventure package packed with content that is updated on a daily basis to make data traffic surge. Ericsson integrates and hosts the package under a managed-services agreement, enabling operators to swiftly introduce the service under their own brands. The VOR mobile portal may be part of an existing portal or a stand-alone service.

At present, 12 operators around the world offer the VOR mobile portal service. Ericsson manages the content and day-to-day operation of the portal from its operation center in Dallas, Texas. Ericsson also facilitates system integration of the portal into different operator environments, and handles the distribution and management of digital rights.

Ericsson’s end-to-end solutions, hosted and operator-owned, cover the provision of networks, service creation, integration and content management. With an operator-owned solution, Ericsson provides the infrastructure for operators to develop, source, launch and deploy content and services. With hosted solutions, Ericsson hosts the infrastructure and takes responsibility for integration, operation, and maintenance, enabling the efficient launch of quality services.

In particular, where the VOR mobile portal is concerned, Ericsson both manages the solution and provides content. “We are responsible for keeping the technical platform



Figure 1
The heart of the pavilion where Ericsson and Sony Ericsson hold customer presentations.

running every day,” Frisk explains. “This includes developing new features to ensure it maintains a given level of quality. It’s as much about end-user experience as it is about guaranteeing technical functions.”

Delivering on the promise of daily updates, makes the gathering and publication of content a round-the-clock mission that is continually developing and improving as the race proceeds. This includes video sequences of interviews, audio interviews, ringtones, wallpapers and games. Streamed images, crew radio conversations and news updates are also available. The portal also provides an opportunity to work with new content feeds such as mobile TV, demonstrating what is commercially achievable.

Content is sourced directly from the race and augmented by related mobile content. Apart from content provided by the race organization, a production team is on site at each of the stopovers to capture the action as it happens. Some of the content will come from cameras mounted on the racing boats, relaying pictures to the portal via satellite. Material recorded on the boats is relayed to the VOR media center, which then distributes it to media channels. “Ten cameras installed on the boats continually record the



Figure 2
The Volvo Ocean Race mobile portal.

action,” Frisk says. “If something dramatic happens, the crew hits a panic button and the cameras automatically save everything that transpired in the last 10 minutes. It is important to distribute this kind of content, because richer content is what appeals to most subscribers.”

Indeed, the richer the portal content, the greater the web usage. “Third-generation technology is important for a rich experience,” Frisk continues. “When media companies see 3G uptake, they will be more inclined to invest in mobile services.”

Huge potential

The mobile portal showcases the revolution that has taken place in mobile communication since the last Volvo Ocean Race. The statistics are positive: more than 150,000 hits and 3,500 downloads each day. “We don’t have definite numbers but these figures indicate that some 6,000-8,000 people are using the portal,” Frisk says.

Video is the most popular content: In the first three months, there were more than 200,000 downloads of audio/video, wallpaper and games, with video accounting for more than 50 percent of downloads. In the future, the nature of the portal could bolster these figures further. “Although sailing is very exciting, it is nevertheless a niche sport,” Frisk says. “If the sport were soccer, we would expect to see a much higher uptake.”

Mobile portals and channel content can be adapted to suit many different kinds of events. In view of their versatility, Ericsson expects mobile event services to grow significantly. “Each year there are several major global events,” Frisk explains. “Mobile channels can be applied to several types of events, from the Olympics and World Cup Soccer to music festivals and global big-name pop tours. These events are always supported by services on the internet and will become increasingly available via mobile channels.” There are also numerous opportunities to “mobilize” events on a smaller scale. There are many national events, for example, for which a mobile portal could be developed. Portals could also be developed to allow sports fans to follow their teams throughout the season.

Ericsson is putting the mobile portal capability into hosting centers around the world. It’s a short hop from the Volvo Ocean Race to promoting any kind of content or event. “The VOR mobile portal showcases the possibilities,” Murphy explains. “And

by promoting itself in this way, Ericsson is showing the extent of what can be achieved. Now that this is established, the strategy is to have these portal solutions in place in every one of our hosting facilities. We can thus provide a quick turnaround for an event or campaign, developing a portal in a relatively short period of time to deliver these same kinds of services.”

To maximize usage, the VOR mobile portal is accessible to most mobile phones. It is also available in three languages: English, Spanish and Portuguese. Given that Spanish and Brazilian syndicates are involved in the race, this was a natural move. Certainly, choice of language influences audience reach. Moreover, the user experience will differ from handset to handset. Some services, for example, require special capabilities, such as Java (in particular, to play a game). Notwithstanding, the vast majority of mobile phones will be able to access a variety of services.

User compatibility

When you join the portal (Box B), the content is adapted to match the capabilities of your phone. Ericsson’s solutions can detect the phone model and type. “We use handset recognition technology,” Murphy says. “We are able to identify the various handsets as users surf the portal. Some have skinny screens, others have wide screens; some are in color, others black and white.”

After extensive testing and collating of all handset screen parameters, the recognition platform database becomes the coding bible. “When a handset hits the channel, we know what model it is,” Murphy explains. “The content is thus distributed according to the handset’s properties.”

One of the great benefits of mobile technology is that users are no longer limited to a certain location to keep track of developments, in this case, the VOR competition. The cost to the user should not be excessive and traffic charges apply according to the individual operator’s tariff schemes. Operators might, however, charge extra for some features, such as online competitions.

At present, the portal houses two channels: premium and basic. Via the premium channel operators can give users a wider range of content, including interactive and personalized content. “The premium site monitors the content a user looks at,” Murphy clarifies. “If a user is a fan of the Ericsson syndicate and likes browsing

Ericsson content, the site will slowly predict the content he or she wants, filtering to the top of the portal news and video clips that are geared toward these preferences."

Technical solution

The technical solution takes advantage of Ericsson's MediaSuite product roadmap (Figure 3). The suite enables downloads and includes tools for alerts, promotions and personalization, as well as the Ericsson Content Delivery Solution (ECDS). With ECDS, users actively request multimedia information to be instantly streamed or downloaded to a wireless device. "The solution does not use any technology that has not already been proven," says Frisk. "For Ericsson, the VOR mobile portal proves the ability to manage a complete service package on a global basis, providing several content formats, including text, images, graphics, audio and video."

The portal is a plug-and-play offering that can be co-branded by operators. The offering also includes a promotional engine that enables operators to run local contests and bundle products. This could be especially attractive in conjunction with leg finishes, restarts, or in-shore races in visited ports. Operators need only commit to cover the costs of integration, traffic charges and marketing.

The mobile portal targets operators and media companies as a means of promoting their brands and of reaching new customers. For operators, the key is producing content that subscribers find attractive in order to drive web usage and complement their existing data and multimedia offerings. "Today, few operators have significant income from data services beyond SMS," Frisk says. "Although voice accounts for the bulk of revenue, operators know that they have to be competitive and maintain subscriber numbers. The way for them to do this is to have a more compelling data package. Operators base their decisions to invest in mobile channels on a business strategy. And clearly, this option is growing in importance."

Conclusion

Mobile portals are about immediacy, interactivity, mobility and adventure. By providing a point of entry to specific content, they give users access to action while on the go.

As an official mobile partner of the Volvo Ocean Race, Ericsson is hosting the VOR mobile portal, which is packed with exclusive content. Through its coverage of this

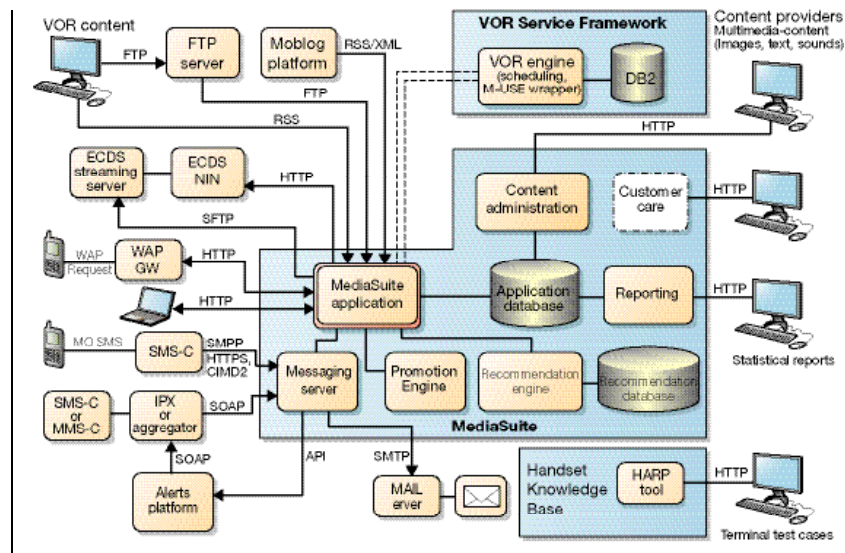


Figure 3
The Ericsson MediaSuite.

event, Ericsson has a unique opportunity to deliver a complete set of services to mobile consumers around the world. Mobile portals and channel content can be adapted to suit many different kinds of events. Indeed, Ericsson expects mobile event services to grow significantly.

Ericsson integrates and hosts the package under a managed-services agreement, enabling operators to swiftly introduce the service under their own brands. Ericsson's end-to-end solutions cover the provision of networks, service creation, integration and content management. With an operator-owned solution, Ericsson provides the infrastructure for operators to develop, source, launch and deploy content and services. With hosted solutions, Ericsson hosts the infrastructure and takes responsibility for integration, operation and maintenance.

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BOX B, JOIN THE VOR MOBILE PORTAL

- To access the VOR mobile portal, send "JOIN" in an SMS to +46 737 494949
- Click "Yes" to the reply SMS
- Register your choice of language, the stopover you are interested in, and the team you want to monitor.