

Xiam

Vendor attempts to crack 'cold start' problem in content recommendations

With an avalanche of mobile music and entertainment content slated to come online this year, service providers can no longer afford to bet their bottom line on the premise that people know what content they want and are prepared to navigate confusing mobile portal menus to find it. Such an approach ignores the form-factor shortcomings common to mobile phones and puts far too much emphasis on user pull.

An alternative is to rely on recommendation engines and other technologies that play matchmaker between content and end-users. In its basic form, recommendation technology – modeled on the approach of online retailer Amazon – suggests content on the basis of what like-minded customers buy.

Xiam, an Ireland-based provider of content-discovery technology, attempts to go a step further with its My Personal Offers System (MPOS), which Orange is due to launch sometime soon. Its server-based approach is designed to help operators and service providers create a holistic view of the subscriber and respond with a well-rounded content offering that goes beyond just downloading a ring tone or a track.

It's also designed to solve the "cold start" problem of figuring out how to suggest content to first-time users who haven't yet made a purchase.

"If a user regularly goes into the gossip section of the portal to read about J-Lo or Kylie, then our solution can intuit that the user has an interest in these celebrities," says Kurt Lillywhite, Xiam's vice president of marketing. "If the same user then goes into the music section, even though they may have never been in the music section before,

we can begin to suggest music around J-Lo and Kylie."

This approach also attempts to break down the walls that traditionally separate different types of content on the portal, such as music from news.

Xiam relies on data picked up by its server at the back end, as well as by a client on the handset. But Xiam doesn't supply the client itself. Its strategy is to piggyback on on-device-portal providers' clients.

The data that MPOS feeds on includes billing information, mobile browsing logs and purchase history.

Xiam offers the technology to operators for a recurring license fee, which consists of a "fixed element and success element," says Lillywhite.

Orange launch

Orange is the only operator that has revealed plans to launch a recommendations service using Xiam's technology. No other details are known about the Orange deployment.

In June, Xiam sealed a nonexclusive deal with Qualcomm to provide its recommendation technology to Qualcomm's BREW platform. The two companies are working on a "specific initial deployment" but have declined to disclose any details. The aim of the partnership is to personalize the mobile-content shopping experience, expand the discovery of content and generate more revenues.

Moving forward, Xiam is focused on enabling fixed/mobile recommendations across a variety of platforms and services, such as PC and IPTV. The strategy would enable users to have a common experience as they visit different content portals and use different

services on different devices.

Users could receive recommendations on what to watch on TV in the evening based on the content they browsed on their mobile during the day, for example. "With our systems, we can track and understand everything," Lillywhite says. "It's all data to our system, and we have the capability to compare metadata – even when there is no common metadata structure."

Xiam's technology also takes context into account, to avoid suggesting upbeat music or other inopportune content on a lazy Sunday afternoon, for example. "It's all about delivering recommendations that apply to the individual user at a particular time in a particular location on the specific device," says Colm Healy, Xiam's CEO. It's an approach that goes far beyond plain vanilla item-by-item recommendations.

There is also a social-networking element to MPOS that not only learns about the user from his interactions with other users, enabling the platform can recommend content, but can also pinpoint the "Alpha" users – who essentially know what's hot and what's not – and work their behavior into the equation. The result is more-precise recommendations and a better understanding of the key elements in the social network.

Another must-have ingredient in the mix is targeted advertising. To that end, Xiam has developed an ad component that uses the same technique the vendor uses to match the right user to the right content to serve up relevant ads related to the content. The service is being tested by an unnamed operator, and a formal launch is expected soon.

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