

Inmarsat Sees Big M2M Benefits in Satellite Broadband

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Inmarsat made a compelling argument for sending M2M over a satellite network instead of a terrestrial variation at its booth at CTIA this year. The satellite broadband company showed off its current services and terminals and M2M program director Joel Schroeder spoke at an M2M conference, announcing some new updates his company has in the pipe.

Schroeder talked about where Inmarsat is going with the investments it's making in M2M, like increasing the number of users its spot beams can accommodate, low-cost plug-and-play antennas for mobile use and a still-developing, cost-effective chipset that will more easily enable embedding a satellite option into more devices.

"Today you may pay more than \$1,000 for a fully functional terminal," Schroeder said. "We expect to get core modules down into the sub-\$100 range eventually."

Inmarsat got its start with M2M before anyone even called it M2M, offering communications services primarily used for maritime safety. Now, its primary M2M offerings cover globally, like its BGAN two-way IP data service which is designed for long-term monitoring and controlling remote, fixed-location assets. Schroeder explained that BGAN runs on an off-the-shelf Ericsson 3G network.

The BGAN uses standard IP and transmits data over SMS channels, features that Inmarsat saw were needed based on early work the company did with utility companies connecting SCADA systems or backhauling smart meter data and for companies connecting weather stations or other environmental monitoring platforms. Schroeder said BGAN was designed to accommodate small frequent transactions and said that BGAN is real-time as opposed to the store-and-forward small message sizes of other packet data services.

Of course, Schroeder recognizes there are many available options for M2M functionality needs, so he was prepared to offer up advantages Inmarsat can provide, both over terrestrial M2M deployment and the company's satellite M2M competitors.

"In terms of advantages, there's clearly the ubiquity, the fact that we can reach anywhere," Schroeder said, referring to the limitations terrestrial networks tend to face.

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He also noted that in areas his company's satellite network has been deployed alongside terrestrial networks, the satellite connections tend to experience less impact from consumer use. But he insisted that Inmarsat's network can serve as a complement or supplement an enterprise's terrestrial network activity.

"If you look at large enterprise customers operating on a global basis, you see mobile operators are all working very hard to get to a single mobile SIM they can sell to a large multinational so they can bill them for the service," Schroeder said, explaining that the roaming rates on those plans can be more expensive than the kind of satellite service Inmarsat offers. Satellite services can offer that single mobile SIM.

As for how Inmarsat stacks up against the other satellite broadband players, Schroeder pointed out his company's unique ability to offer a 3G network running on L Band satellite, which runs a low frequency that proves extremely reliable.

"You have a lot of customers ask about the reliability of the satellite because they think about their DirectTV or Dish Network and how, if there's a rainstorm or other inclement weather, the signal can cut out," said Schroeder. He insisted that L Band service experiences no impact from rain.

He also mentioned that the width of the beam at that low frequency increases, making the process of aiming the antenna much more forgiving.

"I think that combined with real-time 3G data, which is something that differentiates us from other operators in the L Band, give us a very unique proposition in the market," Schroeder said. "Not only vis-à-vis other satellite operators but also as a value add to the terrestrial services that are available."

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