

Q&A: CCA President and CEO Steven K. Berry

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CCA Global Expo is less than a week away and CEO Steven K. Berry is seeing more wireless carriers registered for this CCA than any prior event. The show, running March 25-28 in San Antonio, will feature keynotes from FCC Wireless Bureau Chief Roger Sherman, Sprint Chairman and SoftBank CEO Masayoshi Son and many more wireless industry luminaries. Ahead of the show, Wireless Week spoke with Berry about the policy issues on members' minds and the impact from CCA's biggest members. *The following remarks have been edited for grammar and clarity.*

Wireless Week: What policy issues will likely be highlighted at the show?



Steven K. Berry: We obviously had a huge win on interoperability and that was right on the heels of the auctions that occurred. Now that the H Block auction is over, we'll be looking at AWS-3 and the NPRM on the AWS will be a huge concern. Of course, the incentive auction, which is a huge opportunity especially for the carriers that don't have a lot of low-band spectrum.

The 600 MHz auction is going to be a huge opportunity for every one of our carriers. So the incentive auction rules, eligibility criteria, bidding criteria...geographic size is a huge issue. I thought we might have a little more clarity on the geographic size. We support CMAs but the FCC, especially under Julius Genachowski, indicated that they did not want to go with CMAs and that they wanted to go with EAs. The stakes were way too high to play that game of chicken with the FCC so we came up with a compromise that I think really helps the small-, medium-size carriers have an opportunity to bid in and potentially win auctions for licenses in areas they operate in. And it also gives larger carriers an opportunity to bid on and win licenses in urban and suburban areas.

I think people will talk about how we get broadcasters to show up. We're going to have a representative from NAB on one of the panels to give us the view from the broadcasters' side of the aisle.

We're also going to have FirstNet there for a breakout session to give us an update about where we stand on FirstNet deployments and opportunities going forward. As you know the H Block auction just completed with \$1.56 billion which will go directly to FirstNet and then AWS directly on its heels has the possibility of fully funding FirstNet before you even get to the incentive auction. It'll be interesting to hear what FirstNet's thoughts are on that.

Of course, one of the huge issues our carriers would like to address is the device ecosystem and how can we make sure that smaller carriers get access to the iconic, state-of-the-art devices to provide similar services in rural and regional markets that consumers are accustomed to receiving in urban and suburban markets.

While everyone knows we're moving to IP and TDM will fade and be no more in a few years, a lot of these smaller carriers are on the cusp of 2G/3G services, trying to find a way to get to 4G, and as we transition over what does that mean for them?

WW: What has SoftBank brought to the CCA as newer members?

SKB: We've tried to suggest to our larger members, and this is Sprint and T-Mobile, that collectively if we can develop and mature an ecosystem that every competitive carrier could enjoy the benefits of, then we could essentially compete with the duopoly collectively.

I think we're going to see Sprint and T-Mobile step up to the plate a little about understanding the shared challenges that we've been talking for the last two years. Sprint and T-Mobile have some of the same challenges as our smaller carriers: how do you get a footprint that's nationwide? And then how do you get devices? Sprint still has challenges on the handset side. T-Mobile just bought some 700 MHz from Verizon, so they'll have some similar challenges to get Band 12 devices. Hopefully you're going to hear some discussion about the types of bands that should be in these chipsets that all the carriers are pursuing so that we have some interoperability. I'm hoping that in the next few weeks that we'll have some understandings that we can share with the public.

WW: So we can expect a collaborative announcement from Sprint and T-Mobile regarding an ecosystem for smaller carriers?

SKB: I would say I think we'll see the potential for some of our larger carriers to take a much more active role in the CCA roaming hub. To the extent that they can or are prepared to announce individual actions, I'm hoping that they will be a little more transparent in their thought process. Obviously, when we got interoperability in the 700 MHz, the goal was to ensure that we create an ecosystem that every carrier that wants to can take advantage of. We're moving closer and closer to that.

It appears to me right now that AT&T has already done what they said they were going to do, went to the 3GPP and already requested modifications to the standard. We're going to be moving down the road to where we have Band 12 devices in chips and then everyone is going to be focused on, "When are we going to get VoLTE?" Is VoLTE going to be exclusive to Verizon and AT&T for a while or are we going to be able to get an ecosystem where VoLTE is going to be available to smaller carriers in the immediate future?

From our associate member side—the vendors, the suppliers, infrastructure—they're going to be interested that there's a device ecosystem out there that encourages carriers to build out 4G networks. And I think that's the missing component that could unleash another round of aggressive 4G LTE buildout from smaller Tier 1, Tier 2 and Tier 3 carriers.

WW: In terms of LTE and the next big push for smaller carriers, do you think Sprint's and T-Mobile's network advances in 2013 and early 2014 has had a positive effect?

SKB: Yes, I believe so, because when you have a larger carrier building out a network—and you must admit both Sprint and T-Mobile have been more favorably inclined to have relationships with smaller carriers—that can't do anything but help. To my knowledge, I just don't know of an AT&T 4G LTE roaming relationship in existence. And the only 4G roaming relationships through Verizon that I'm aware of are the ones through their LRA program.

I'm hoping that we're making some progress in giving our smaller carriers some choices now through some of our larger members recognizing that they too can benefit through a more comprehensive footprint.

WW: It's been about a year since Dish Network's Tom Cullen joined the CCA board. How has he and Dish as a whole impacted things at CCA?

SKB: Obviously they were very helpful when it came to interoperability. I think they were very supportive of the smaller carriers. While they had negotiations on the side for themselves, they were helpful in the discussions and not an impediment.

[Dish has] some very interesting things going on with some small carriers. nTelos and Dish kicked off a test bed on a high-speed mobile broadband capability and Dish and Sprint inked a deal where they're doing something very similar. That shows some great promise and shows that Dish is willing to partner with the smaller carriers. Any time you give some of these smaller, innovative carriers some choices, that's a good thing.

Dish has been a very supportive member. I still don't know what [Dish Chairman Charlie] Ergen is going to do with his spectrum. Now that he owns H Block, he has a substantial swath of spectrum nationwide and I suspect we'll hear from him pretty soon on what he thinks would be some economical uses of it. The good thing about it is that he is focused on rural and regional markets. What he hopes to have is a Dish product in every rural household and that has the opportunity of giving some

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of these smaller wireless carriers the equivalent of the triple play.

WW: Even a larger carrier like Sprint could benefit from that.

SKB: Right and quite frankly that's one of SoftBank's strong suits. In Japan, they are one of the premier integrated mobile/wireless broadband providers and I think Masayoshi Son's vision is to bring that same type of capability into the U.S. especially into rural areas. And that's where I think some of our smaller members are perfect partners for his endeavors.

I'm hoping that there'll be a lot of positive energy, a lot of collaboration, and I think we'll see the challenges are uniform across the plane. It's not just Sprint or T-Mobile has a solution and no one else can get to it. They need similar solutions and I'm hopeful that Sprint and T-Mobile—as they roll out their 750—will find some real economies of scale by teaming and partnering with smaller carriers.

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