Selling Better Wi-Fi: It's Performance That Now Counts

Written by Bob Snyder
03 October 2013

Today's networks need to be designed for wifi capacity, not just coverage. That's one significant point Xirrus, maker of high performance wireless networks, wants to highlight using the recent Apple iOS 7 release as an example.

Most Apple iOS use wi-fi to download updates such as the iOS 7 release, and the latest update wreaked havoc on many networks (e.g., in educational institutions where the BYOD density of Apple device owners is high.)

Bruce Miller, VP product marketing at Xirrus [shown in photo], tells us "There was a 300% increase in traffic at some universities when the iOS 7 update was pushed to the public. Many wireless networks cannot handle this kind of spike -- networks were immediately and significantly impacted. IT administrators can no longer turn a blind eye to wireless demand, but must design networks to support mobile devices used in education – not all foreign devices that attempt to connect to the network, but devices carried and used legitimately by students."

When traffic on the wireless surges to 3X-5X times normal, that's what Xirrus calls a "Flash Traffic Scenario."

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It doesn't have to be an iPhone update...these flash traffic events happen more and more as wireless devices become ubiquitous as well as always on. The World Cup, a captivating Gangnam-style video, or even a jumbo jet pouring phone-happy passengers into an airport can create unexpected demands. For another example, the day that Instagram enabled video was the same day they overtook YouTube in video traffic and created a classic flash traffic incident.

More and more network managers complain of these incidents.

"IT administrators must be aware of the vastly different requirements of applications on the network," says Miller. "Tools such as Xirrus Application Control regulate how the network handles bandwidth-hogging apps, but also regulate traffic flow for example, to prevent thousands of students from downloading a software update at the same time and crashing the network. This time the challenge was iOS 7. With Android 4.4 KitKat rumored to be released soon, this should be on every IT manager's mind."

And if wifi usage spikes are on every IT manager's mind, then it should certainly be on the mind of the solution providers that serve those IT managers.

It's an education issue. Where you once you set up wifi for a customer, saw 5 bars and assumed all was go, now you have to anticipate the spikes and design for capacity and not just coverage.

Most customers don't want to pay the 2X or 3X for extra capacity that you get with traditional solutions in the network core, so Xirrus thinks its own solution-- which puts application recognition on the network edge-- makes capacity more accessible. Xirrus uses a Deep Packet Inspection engine that recognizes about 1200 apps to get optimization at the network edge.

With Xirrus application recognition, an IT manager can not only recognize an app but also specify what action to take: for example, recognizing an iTunes update download that might provoke simultaneous strain on the network and throttling it down so users won't suck network resources from other essential or more important applications.

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"Most networks today are under-provisioned," says Miller. Any business traveler can tell you that, based on encounters with under-nourished wifi at hotels, airports and other public venues.

Xirrus was recently the official wireless provider to Interop New York 2013 where they provided high-speed network connectivity to thousands of attendees and exhibitors across the 675,000 square-foot of New York's Jacob K. Javitz Center.

Another event (Salesforce's event, Dreamforce) saw 90,000 developers and users using a Xirrus wireless network where 20,000 were simultaneously on the network, 6000 users were in a single room for keynotes, and 900 users aboard a single array at the same time...

Based on this type of Xirrus experience, Miller says, "As an industry, we've been looking at BYOD more as a security problem. That's not the biggest issue any more. Wireless performance is the real challenge that's emerging."

And that emerging wireless challenge brings solution providers a revised sales script to align with the needs of network managers.