

Open Spectrum

DEVICES, APPLICATIONS MULTIPLY, BUSINESS CONTINUITY RISKS RISE AS AUCTION FALLOUT CONTINUES.



BRENDA LEWIS
Principal
Transactions
Marketing



The auction of “beachfront” 700 MHz spectrum that began Jan. 24, 2008, marked a watershed in U.S. wireless communications, at last freeing a portion of airwaves from the restrictive device and application rules of Verizon Wireless, Sprint and AT&T.

This spectrum is highly desirable because it readily passes through buildings and travels over longer distances than current cellular frequencies. While Google lobbied for this “open” spectrum and is a registered bidder for it, any new wireless broadband network will take three to five years to build out.

This lead time — coupled with the release of Android, an open Linux platform owned by Google — prompted Verizon to open its *existing* network. Verizon will test others’ devices in its lab and hold a developer conference on March 19-20 to foster new devices and applications on its platform, in hopes of getting the jump on Google. Since CDMA devices represent only 20% of the global total, this strategy offers Verizon a way to grow its subscriber base without escalating its own costs of supporting devices and applications. The bad news for the enterprise is that I.T. teams will now be required to manage mobile devices and application support from more vendors than ever.

Another indirect issue for enterprises is whether to revisit and update business continuity programs. Why? A chunk of 700MHz spectrum (10MHz in the D Block) designated for commercial development carries with it the obligation to revert to the control of first responders in the event of emergencies.

The only known bidder for this spectrum was Frontline Wireless LLC. On Jan. 12, 2008,

Frontline announced it was closed for business. There are no other announced bidders.

This is bad news for first responders and, indirectly, for the businesses that must coordinate with them. It’s now back to square one on public safety spectrum: a nearly 50% shortfall of the 100 MHz recommended by The Public Safety Wireless Advisory Committee (PSWAC) on Sept. 11, 1996 (yes, the real issue date). Meanwhile, the Business “Crisis Communications” section of The Department of Homeland Security’s (DHS) Web site, www.ready.gov, continues to assume cell phones will be available for emergency communications. This is the case even after the wireless communications meltdown in Hurricane Katrina, where not only cellular base stations were destroyed, but media transmissions were allowed to crowd out Louisiana State Police satellite phone communications. It remains to be seen whether legislation signed into law on Aug. 3, 2007, which requires DHS to provide for the development of a private sector voluntary certification program for all-hazards business emergency preparedness (“Implementing Recommendations of the 9/11 Commission Act of 2007”), will promulgate similar flawed assumptions.

Cellular is *not* a redundant transmission medium and users shouldn’t rely on it for emergency communications. There are newly available K_a band spot-beam satellite services that are cost effective and redundant. I recommend mobility managers investigate these emerging options for business continuity programs. In the interim, let’s hope there is a stealth bidder for the D block. //

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