

Vodafone turns its network into an international development platform

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This morning, Vodafone announced that it intends to stimulate a new generation of mobile Internet applications by providing developers with a single point of access to its global customer base. Initially in eight European markets, developers will have access via a service-oriented architecture to Vodafone's location and billing infrastructure via APIs, providing them with a pan-European marketplace and a system to collect micropayments.

All the mobile operators have talked about the need to avoid becoming the "dumb pipe" to the Internet. But Vodafone consistently put its money where its mouth is. Ever since the launch of Vodafone live! over six years ago, Vodafone has continued to invest in ensuring that its brand remains at the forefront of its customers' experience of mobile internet and multimedia services. Today's announcements look like an important new phase in implementing that strategy.

Other operators can offer similar facilities, but it would be hard for them to offer developers an addressable market of the same size as the one Vodafone has built. Moreover, in the internet world, mobile operators are not just competing against other mobile operators; they are also increasingly competing against handset vendors and internet brands that also have ambitions to own the customer experience. Vodafone's initiative gives it an advantage against these competitors too: with location and billing available through APIs Vodafone offers developers facilities that would very difficult for those competitors to match. Vodafone also has scope to widen that advantage further – consider, for example, the possibilities offered by APIs that give developers access to messaging infrastructure, or to customer care.

It remains to be seen, of course, the extent to which what Vodafone is promising today is realised in practice. The idea that developers can write applications without reference to the operating system they will run on has been tried before, with only partial success. A couple of years after Java became widespread on mobile phones, a cottage industry emerged to produce handset-specific "flavours" of Java applications. But if it does deliver everything it has announced today, we believe Vodafone can use it to develop a position in the mobile internet market that its competitors would find difficult to match.