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Spotlight

Giving Voice to SMS

*A specialist in mobile value-added services, Kirusa Inc has innovations such as Voice SMS to its credit. By **Tanu Talwar***

In the backdrop of constant innovation in the mobile and telecom space, users are looking for enhanced services over and above the traditional services offered by operators. Consumer demand for value added services have resulted in multi modality becoming a catchphrase. The growing realisation amongst users about the numerous ways in which they can interact with a service is contributing to this trend.



Kirusa Inc, a leading provider of mobile-based value added services and solutions was quick to recognise the potential of a multi-modal infrastructure enabling wireless carriers and enterprises to offer value-added applications with integrated vocal interfaces. Established in 2001, by a group of industry veterans, the company is committed to bringing the benefits of mobile messaging to a new and experimental segment of users, and aims at providing advanced and inexpensive modes of communication to people around the world through its pioneering services offerings such as Voice SMS. Founded by Dr. Inderpal Singh Mumick, the company was confounded by his colleagues Louis Golm, Barinderpal Mumick and Sandeep Sibal while Dr Mumick worked with AT&T, Lucent and Bell Labs respectively.



"The service enhances a user's flexibility and freedom by providing the option to send audio SMS messages"

- **Dr Inderpal Singh Mumick**
Chairman and
CEO
Kirusa

Headquartered in New Jersey, the company has sales and marketing offices in New Delhi (India), Paris (France) and Hong Kong, with a global research and development facility in Bangalore, India. Talking about the benefits of multi-modality, Dr Inderpal Singh Mumick, Chairman and CEO, Kirusa, says, "Multi modality refers to seamlessly combining graphics, text and audio output with speech, text, and touch inputs to deliver an enhanced experience to the end user. Through the platform, users can perform a number of functions such as speak, type, hear, read text as well as scan through graphics while receiving information." When compared to a single-mode interface in which a user can only use voice, audio or visual modes, multi-modal applications give them multiple options for inputting and receiving information. The function not only makes a service or application more intuitive but it also equips users with the freedom to experiment and choose how they want to use a service at each step in the process.

Changing Lanes

Recalling the tough times, Dr Mumick says, "Early 2001 was a testing time for the technology industry. Although many wireless providers had planned to make headway with their presence in 3G technology, capital investment by wireless providers came to a virtual standstill, largely due to the economic recession. This delayed deployment of 3G technology was one of the initial challenges faced by us." However, the key obstacle encountered by the company was the lack of compatibility between its product and the existing infrastructure at wireless carriers. The initial products required wireless carriers to switch their entire platforms. "On each 2.5G and 3G handset, a company like Sprint would have to install Kirusa's multi-modal technology to be able

to make use of all the features of Kirusa's platform which was deployed on its network," explains Dr Mumick.

Kirusa decided to develop a product that ran as an application on a platform, as opposed to creating an entire platform. Thus, the company changed its focus from creating an application that would work solely on a 2.5G or 3G phone to creating a product that could work in-sync with the software already loaded on a customer's wireless handsets. Dr Mumick explains, "Seeing the magnitude of the problem it was imperative for us to change the focus of our product development. Thus we decided to concentrate on building an application that was truly device-agnostic. After much brainstorming, we began exploring the idea of voice SMS." In a short span of six years, Kirusa, has climbed to the top of the ladder in this space by maintaining a strong focus on offering the best in networking architecture, capability extensions, user interfaces, administration, billing as well as equipping the customers with the finest possible tools for self administration, message creation and management.

It's this special commitment to bring forth the best that has helped the company get top marks from mobile operators around the world. After starting out with just one client six years back, the company has roped in ten customers from across the world with a client list that includes the likes of GrameenPhone Bangladesh), France Telecom, Bankinter (Spain), Warid Telecom in Bangladesh, Map Telecom (Monaco).

Meanwhile the company's dedication to continuously upgrade and offer enhanced services has not only aided it in bagging customers but also helped it sustain the old ones. The company's commitment to its clients can be judged from its continued association with its first client, Bouygues Telecom, a France based GPRS mobile operator. "Our first client for the multi-modal applications was Bouygues Telecom. Our association with Bouygues Telecom marked both the first integration of a multi-modal platform in a real 2.5G mobile network environment, and the first network implementation of simultaneous multi-modality, where voice and visual information seamlessly interact," explains, Dr Mumick.

Voice SMS helps address illiterate sections of the population who are otherwise locked out of value-added services. It eliminates linguistic barriers and thus has tremendous scope in rural areas. A Voice SMS enables the listener to listen to the exact voice of the messenger

Kirusa's points of differentiation	
Click2 listen	The technology connects the recipient, with a single click, directly to the message without the need to log in or navigate through menus. Click2Listen (patent pending) introduces an entirely new user interface in which users can directly access a voice message by dialling the number embedded in the SMS message.
Multiple networks	Messages can be sent and easily retrieved anywhere across any network be it a GSM or a CDMA network.
International Voice SMS	The company's international voice SMS connects mobile subscribers across 40 countries.
Language customization	The feature recognises the language that people want to use and allows for systems prompts to be put into any language.

Ease and speed of deployment	The solution offered by Kirusa, can be deployed quickly and is well integrated with all pre and post billing systems running on all generations of GSM and CDMA networks.
Open, standards based multi-modal platform	The platform helps to bridge services into a 3G or an IMS network thereby simplifying the implementation of next generation services

Broadening the product portfolio

The pioneering service offered by Kirusa is Voice SMS. According to Dr Mumick, the primary reason behind offering this service was to present a winning combination of benefits to mobile service providers that would enable them to maximise their ROI and revenue while reducing operating expenditure. Highlighting the benefits of Voice SMS, Dr Mumick states, "The service enhances a user's flexibility and freedom by providing the option to send audio SMS messages." Then again, the service can reduce the infrastructure cost of mobile operators by shifting traffic from CAPEX-intensive voice mail to revenue-generating Voice SMS. Moreover, compared to standard text messaging, voice SMS is built on the basic benefit of convenient and inexpensive messaging and yet overcomes the difficulties posed by "triple tap" text input in situations where this is not feasible.

Significantly, Voice SMS helps address illiterate sections of the population who are otherwise locked out of value-added services. It eliminates linguistic barriers and thus has tremendous scope in rural areas. Unlike text messaging where one needs to know the exact language that the handset supports, a Voice SMS enables the listener to listen to the exact voice of the messenger offering the same cost-effective model as a text message which is to say that it is free of cost for the recipient.

In order to support the application, the company offers a multi-modal platform that has the ability to manage and synchronise data and voice interactions. The platform enables the integration of an IMS and 3G standard thereby facilitating customers to effectively deploy additional revenue generating services at a lower cost. Talking about its first client for Voice SMS, GrammenPhone (Bangladesh), Dr Mumick states, "The Voice SMS solution for GrameenPhone in Bangladesh, was implemented and deployed within 60 days from the time of the signing of the letter of intent and it was an instant success right from its launch." One of the primary reasons for the wide scale adoption of the service was the simplicity of the process for sending and receiving voice messages.

Besides offering these services the company is looking to expand its current portfolio of products and services. The recent purchase of intellectual property assets from HeyAnita, an US based software and application developer, has reinforced its commitment to offer enhanced value-added services to its customers. With applications such as the Weather Information, Travel Application Suite, Entertainment Application Suite, vGreetings and Alerts the deal has enriched Kirusa in more ways than one. Furthermore, the company is also looking to incorporate convergent Voice SMS services (the ability to send Voice SMS from a land line to mobile phone and vice versa), Video SMS and other futuristic messaging options.

Capitalising on the Indian market

Operating from two key locations in India, the company has a sales and marketing office in New Delhi and a global research and development facility in Bangalore. While the Delhi branch provides local sales and support to wireless carriers in the region, enabling them to leverage

Kirusa's ability to deploy the Voice SMS solution in less than 60 days via simple integration with their existing network infrastructure, the R&D facility in Bangalore serves as the company's global centre for all its development activities such as conceptualisation, visualisation, drafting, designing, implementation, testing and scientific research.

A major attraction for the company in India has been the country's young and talented workforce. Nearly 75 percent of the company's global workforce is based out of India. Dr Mumick says, " We have over 80 employees worldwide of whom 75 percent are based in India." In order to further capitalise on the burgeoning Indian talent the company plans to double its existing headcount by end 2007.

For Kirusa, India is an leading business destination with vast potential for the company's Voice SMS technology. Even though no official announcements have been made, the company has already tied up with four leading mobile and telecom operators both in the government and the private sector and it will be announcing their names by mid February. Dr Mumick asserts, "We are extremely bullish about India. Currently there are hardly any value-added services that have been popular in rural India. We feel that Voice SMS would soon change this as the service will enable users to send and receive SMS using voice." Besides rural India, the service has scope in urban regions as well since it offers a time saving, cost effective mode of interaction.

Besides India the company has also obtained customers in Pakistan, Sri Lanka, as well as additional customers in Bangladesh. Furthermore, the company is also looking at making faster inroads in to the Middle East and Africa by the mid of this year apart from reinforcing its presence in South Asia, South East Asia, Europe, North and South America.