Technology push versus market pull is one of those conundrums that every industry battles with from time to time. In any business it’s about finding that sweet spot in time when consumers are ready to accept new ways of doing things. As a consequence, history is littered with technology that was simply ahead of its time; however, a great many new solutions have been extremely successful. One such example is the Internet and the resulting industry that has catalysed around it. A simple communications concept but one which is having arguably the greatest affect on the way that we consume media and entertainment since the invention of television in the 1920s.

It could be said that some early Internet-based television innovations were pushed too early and were consequent failures, however, today television is not all about broadcast, but how the medium is complemented by the Internet. The traditional definition of broadcasting – from one point to many, has been supplemented by one to one services as ‘broadcasters’ have embraced the IP future and are now delivering two way, customised services over truly hybrid networks. Sky, DISH, Liberty Global, Comcast, and a host of others have all invested in technologies to enable them to embrace the IP age. Take DISH for example which offers customers a combination of IP delivered services including the Blockbuster@HOME™ movie streaming service, TV Everywhere™ technology which enables viewing on a mobile device through the DISH Remote Access app and DISH Online which allows viewing on a computer.

Echostar’s Gary Stephenson and Ian Walker discuss Android and other innovative converged technologies

Gary Stephenson, Product Manager IP at EchoStar: “The delivery of television and video is moving across to mobile devices – it is no longer only about the bigger screen as we’ve seen an explosion in the roll out of mobile devices in the last two years. Traditional computer companies are looking to exploit their position and ability to distribute media across multiple platforms. For example, Google is making a very big drive to push video content, apps and books across its mobile and TV platform using Android as the common force to achieve this goal”.

Ian Walker, Director of Sales & Marketing – EMEA Pay TV at EchoStar: “The industry has spent the last few years moving television onto mobile devices and now it’s coming ‘home’ to TV but it’s been enhanced by increased interactivity and easy navigation to additional services. From the manufacturing perspective, the major CE companies are building Android into their TV sets. All major silicon vendors are offering Android as part of their integrations and the biggest service providers are using Android as an open and scalable platform to deliver services. The big picture is that OTT is being integrated within managed service environments and Android already has massive penetration”.

When push comes to pull
What is the key to the proliferation of the Android™ platform?

Ian Walker: “The market is consolidating and Android is proving to be somewhat of a unifying force – it can be seen as a self perpetuating standard offering a common denominator across mobile devices. It’s only natural for Android to expand to the TV. It is rapidly becoming the de facto standard for the delivery of multimedia. The key is that it is open and freely available to developers and platform operators although proprietary implementations are still possible – offering the best of both worlds.”

For broadcasters, content owners and programming providers, its no longer just being about a channel on a Pay TV guide; content extends much further than that with the aforementioned companies appearing as a tile/app on a tablet, smartphone or Smart TV screen – BBC iPlayer and SkyGo are perfect examples of content providers catering for the big screen and small screen environments, the ‘at home’ and the ‘on-the-go’ customer. The next stage - as recently suggested by the UK’s DTG in its D-book 7 release is how such apps, in this case catch-up TV and other pieces of IP delivered content, become fully integrated into the guide, allowing a single point of reference for the consumer. TV platform operators are now looking to exploit their investments in the Internet to make their services more attractive or sticky, or even to create new revenues.

So along with the shift in delivery technology has come about a shift in the devices upon which we consume entertainment. The IT domain has been thrust together with the broadcast space like giant tectonic plates; the result has been a string of devices that support both IT/lifestyle and entertainment applications and one of the biggest innovations is the tablet – a walking, talking portable TV. Internet technologies and brands are moving and gaining traction in the TV space and the boundaries between IT, entertainment and the TV are less easily defined. It’s true to say that it is not only innovation in the broadcasting world that has driven broadcasters and their technology suppliers to evolve, but also changes in markets with customers demanding entertainment anytime, anywhere. On the big screen there are a handful of platforms for delivering content over IP to the set-top box or secondary, companion devices; HbbTV, DLNA® and YouView to name but a few but take for example the mobile device industry where key, game changing products such as smart phones and tablets, and universal operating systems such as Android™ have resulted in the ubiquitous presence of portable screens and the demand for video entertainment based services.

Why are operators interested in Android™?

Ian Walker: “Mobile telephony operators are particularly interested in Android for delivering over-the-top entertainment services since they see it as a natural extension of what they are doing in the mobile space – as such Android is considered the prime candidate”.

Gary Stephenson: “For operators who wish to offer walled-garden Internet delivered services Android fits the bill and is the logical next stage”.

What barriers exist to the roll-out of Android in the pay TV space?

Ian Walker: “There will always be some hesitation and uncertainty where there is dependency on any large corporation with the size and power of Google. However, it seems highly unlikely that Google would switch their open software model overnight – the current model has acquired universal support and I believe that reluctance to adopt Android will be relatively short-lived when weighed against the benefits accruing from an open and scalable model which enables the operator to profitably develop existing assets and fully embrace a multi device, over-the-top strategy”.

What’s fair to say is that the broadcaster can no longer afford to focus on the main TV alone as the on-the-go generation uses new technology to pull media consumption outside the home and to multiple devices. EchoStar’s investment – for example – in Sling Media and in platforms such as Android™ has ensured that it can deliver entertainment anytime, anywhere and on any device at an optimal level of quality. Like the broadcasters, EchoStar has had to evolve into something that is wholly capable of serving TV operators and service providers with the technology required to deliver a multitude of IP services that support the broadcast offering. Technology push or market pull? The key task is making it all work in harmony.

EchoStar’s Android™-based set-top solutions will be showcased at IBC Hall 1 stand F76.