



Will AT&T, Verizon and Sprint dominate the mHealth market?

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By Sara Jackson

An intriguing view of the mHealth market's future emerged from E-Commerce Times columnist Jeff Kagan last week. He sees the Big Three telecom giants--AT&T, Verizon and Sprint--becoming major players in the evolution of mobile healthcare.

The bigger question for hospital CIOs, though, is how big a role? With their nationwide networks and millions of plugged-in customers, they have some powerful leverage. Will they be content to remain supporting players, providing bandwidth, networking and wireless services? Or will they want to be center stage, and try to become direct healthcare service providers?

Kagan's view, based on conversations with all three telecoms, is that they're flailing at the moment, unsure exactly where to dive into the mHealth pool. Their interest is clear, though. The Alliance for Telecommunications Industry Solutions--of which AT&T, Sprint and Verizon are members--just announced last week that it's creating a mobile health initiative. Interestingly, association officials indicate they're sticking with the back-office functionality--working on standardizing and improving bandwidth, networking protocols and security for the transport of medical data, not creating or managing health services.

AT&T has stepped the closest to the provider side of the market. It has started several new pilot projects with in the past few years, including introduction of a new "smart slippers" product to track gait abnormality and falls, a diabetes management system using the WellDoc DiabetesManager, and cloud-based medical imaging and security services. The telecom giant even has some beta projects in place at hospitals--a telehealth project with St. Joseph's Health System in Orange, Calif., and a WellDoc test with Health Care Service Corp.

Verizon, meanwhile, has partnered with BL Healthcare to test and "power" BL's telehealth system, but has made it clear that the product belongs to BL, not to Verizon.

Sprint has taken more of a back-seat approach, as well, also partnering to support BL Healthcare's telehealth system and Calgary Scientific's mobile medical imaging system, but not purchasing or selling either product itself. At this year's CTIA meeting, a Sprint exec indicated the company appeared to be looking to collaborate on mHealth projects, but isn't in any rush to create its own, according to coverage in RCR Wireless.

The truth is, carriers have got plenty on their plate already, in upgrading networks, infrastructure and security protocols, says Adam Worsham, VP for strategic services with consulting firm Beacon Partners, Weymouth, Mass.

"No matter who wins the app wars, there will be huge amounts of data" generated, he tells FierceMobileHealthcare. "I think it would be a mistake for them to get into the app development business. They've got a ton to do just getting their networks set up properly for the amount of data [that will be] transferred across their networks."

At the end of the day, that's likely the path most carriers will take--partnering for and not providing healthcare apps, software and services--says Fran Turisco, healthcare technology research consultant with CSC. "Their core competencies are infrastructure, user devices and connectivity and

communications--not healthcare software development," Turisco says, adding that what makes the most sense is that the carriers provide the opportunity for app/software developers to reach their network audiences.

In the end, carriers make their money by having more traffic on their networks, not by controlling what travels across them.