



What does AT&T's T-Mobile USA acquisition mean for mobile health?

By Brian Dolan
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Every couple of years another major mobile operator acquisition takes place in the US — in 2008 Verizon Wireless bought Alltel, which made Verizon Wireless the largest operator in the US by subscribers. This year it looks to be AT&T's bid to acquire T-Mobile USA for \$39 billion. While this deal still faces considerable regulatory challenges, we wondered what an AT&T-T-Mobile merger would mean for mobile health.

On the face of it, not much. More than any of the other major US mobile operators T-Mobile USA has most often stood on the sidelines of mobile health activity. Maybe T-Mobile has just kept mum on its mHealth pursuits, but the operator has made little more than a peep about mobile health these past few years.

WellCare: T-Mobile USA's idea for an mHealth service

At the Mobile Health event produced by Stanford University's Persuasion Technology Lab, the director of strategic innovation at the T-Mobile Creation Center, Winston Wang showed attendees a "concept" for a mobile health service that his team had created to explain the mHealth opportunity to the operators' top brass:

Wang played a short commercial for a concept service his team developed, called T-Mobile's WellCare. The video showed a woman in her late 60s or early 70s waking up, taking medication and going for a walk. As she moves from her bedroom to her bathroom, a "nightlight" glows and blinks indicating it recognized movement. After she takes her medication, a younger woman, assumedly her daughter, is shown in another location receiving a text message. As the older lady laces up and goes for a walk, an "activity monitor" message appears on her TV screen in the background, and the younger woman once again gets an alert — assumedly one that tells her that her mother is on-the-move. "WellCare from T-Mobile let's you loved ones keep their independence, while keeping you informed," the "commercial" concluded.

Wang made clear at the time that T-Mobile USA had no plans to develop this idea into a product or service.

Text4Baby: The only mHealth initiative T-Mobile USA has been involved with?

T-Mobile USA was involved in one of the major mHealth service launches in the US last year — Text4Baby. Of course, every US mobile operator — large and small — seemed to be involved with the launch of Text4Baby. Text4Baby is a free mHealth service that "provides timely and expert health information through SMS text messages to pregnant women and new moms through their babies' first year." Mobile operators played a big part in the program's accessibility — the operators all waived the fees for Text4Baby-related messages, which would typically cost users the same amount as any other text message they sent or received.

My colleague Neil Versel had a rare peak inside the mind of one of T-Mobile USA's healthcare leads: Scott Ellis, business development manager of telemedicine for T-Mobile USA, told attendees at the

Mobile Health Expo in Las Vegas last year that the T-Mobile USA had made a conscious decision not to offer direct mHealth products, but rather to provide network and custom billing support to partners.

“It makes a very clean model for us,” Ellis said at the time.

T-Mobile USA: 2G is good enough for mHealth

Ellis also made an impression on EMR & HIPAA's writer John Glynn who noted that Ellis told attendees at that same Mobile Health Expo event that mHealth services don't need 3G data network support and that 2G suffices in most cases. While 3G and 4G data networks open up the possibility for higher bandwidth video applications and the like, 2G can certainly handle those devices that only ping the network once in a while — like with alert apps, for example.

Conclusion: T-Mobile USA is not heavily invested in mHealth

As far as the public record goes, it seems T-Mobile USA is not very interested in nor very active in mobile health. It's new suitor, AT&T is far more active. AT&T announced the launch of its ForHealth group last year and has inked deals with chronic disease management service providers like WellDoc, MedApps, Vitality and others.

T-Mobile USA's lack of interest in mobile health, however, does not preclude this \$39 billion acquisition from helping AT&T's position in mHealth.

If the acquisition of T-Mobile USA clears the necessary regulatory hurdles, T-Mobile USA's parent company Deutsche Telekom would own about 8 percent of AT&T and also have a seat on the company's board. A strong partner in Europe could bring an number of opportunities.

Also, the most talked about of AT&T's current challenges is its network capacity issues. Smartphone users in San Francisco and New York City are especially vocal about connectivity issues with AT&T's 3G network. The acquisition of T-Mobile USA brings an impressive amount of new wireless spectrum and capacity to AT&T's networks.

It would mean more bandwidth and better coverage for mobile health app users, too.