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Vodafone enters mobile phone applications market

Vodafone takes on rivals such as Apple, Nokia and Google by creating its own application store

Richard Wrayguardian.co.uk, Tuesday 12 May 2009 20.31 BST

Vodafone is joining the rush to capitalise on the boom in downloadable 'widgets' for mobile phones by creating its own application store as it looks to claw back revenues from rivals such as Apple, Nokia and Google.

The company is offering software developers the opportunity to tap into its billing platform, so they can charge customers through their phone bill, and provide details about a phone's position so they can build applications which provide local information. Vodafone will take a 30% cut of any charge levied by application developers when the service goes live in the autumn.

While it has been possible to create and download applications on to handsets for years, the arrival of the iPhone has revolutionised the market and driven a wedge between the mobile phone companies and their customers, leaving the network itself as little more than a broadband "pipe in the air".

Since its launch last year, more than 1bn applications, from games and online newspapers to taxi-finding services and music players, have been downloaded from the iTunes store. It has spurred Nokia, the world's largest handset manufacturer, to create its own store under the Ovi brand, while Microsoft recently opened its Windows Mobile Marketplace to developers ahead of a consumer launch later in the year.

RIM already has App World, aimed at software developers who want to create programmes for its Blackberry devices, and Google has released its own mobile phone operating system - called Android - enabling buyers of two handsets to download applications from the Android Marketplace.

Vodafone, however, believes its move into the applications game is different because it wants to be able to offer a "one size fits all" proposition to developers, enabling them to create programmes that will work on a phone running any software and located on any Vodafone network.

"Our initiative is unique by its scale - any device, any operating system, any country," said Michel Combes, who heads Vodafone's European business, "and this is embedded in our network, our billing system and our location capabilities."

In theory, this means a developer will instantly be able to tap into Vodafone's 289 million global customers - once their application has gained clearance from the company.

The reality, however, is that Vodafone has so far only plugged in phones that run on the Series 60 platform created by Symbian, which is owned by Nokia and only licensed by the Finnish company, LG and Samsung. It has also connected phones running the Opera internet browser for developers who want to create applications that run on a mobile phone's internet connection, but that browser is only installed on about 125m phones. Users of Nokia phones, meanwhile, will still be able to access the Ovi store.

Vodafone does hope to be able to eventually add Windows Mobile and Android to its proposition, but it is unlikely that the Vodafone applications store will ever be accessible to iPhone users because of the Apple certification process. Location data, meanwhile, will only be available for developers to use in countries where Vodafone owns its network outright.

The Vodafone store is a result of the Joint Innovation Lab project which brings together Vodafone, China Mobile, Softbank in Japan and Verizon Wireless in the US, who together represent more than 700 million potential customers.

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