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Backup Power Reemerges As Issue for Cable VoIP Service

Northeast Power Outage and Hurricane Isabel Stir Concerns About Network Reliability

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By Alan Breznick, Editor, *Cable Datacom News*

It looks like cable operators preparing to roll out voice-over-Internet-Protocol (VoIP) service over their broadband plant may need to beef up their plans for emergency power backup, thanks to the back-to-back punches of the massive U.S. Northeast blackout in August and Hurricane Isabel last month.

The national Network Reliability & Interoperability Council (NRIC)--a group of wireline phone, wireless phone, cable, satellite and Internet executives that advises the FCC on technical issues and develops voluntary "best practices" standards for its industries--is looking at tightening its emergency power recommendations for all telephone providers. At their last meeting in Washington, D.C. in mid-Sept., NRIC members discussed the need for enhanced power backup because consumers are increasingly relying on all their communications networks during emergencies.

"We need to think more diversely about customer communications, such as cable phone or cable data service," said Pam Stegora Axberg, a senior vice president of Qwest National Network who chairs the NRIC Steering Committee. That's "because during times of crisis, people are using multiple channels," she noted.

Axberg said NRIC members are also looking at setting a higher standard for the amount of backup power needed. While the council's best practices now call for a minimum of eight hours of backup power, that standard could climb to 12 hours or beyond because of the great length of the outages caused first by the blackout and then by the hurricane.

"Now we're wondering whether that (the current standard) is long enough," she said. "We've never seen a power outage last this long previously."

What this means is that cable operators may soon be expected to provide emergency power backup for their fledgling IP telephony services at all times, even when the electricity shuts down and the lights go out. That, in turn, could require MSOs to conduct more expensive upgrades of their HFC plant, which is something that they've resisted doing so far.

It also means that cable operators may be expected to provide backup phone power for much longer stretches of time than before. That would likely mean higher costs for them as well.

Although such leading cable phone players as Comcast and Cox Communications now provide "network powering" of customer premises telephony devices for their older circuit-switched services, MSOs have been balking at doing the same for IP telephony because of the high cost. Instead, many big cable operators have been touting the idea of using a less costly backup battery, which would keep the embedded multimedia terminal adapter (E-MTA) going for up to 10 hours in case of a power outage. And unlike network powering, which requires an upfront network investment before installing subscribers, the capital cost for a battery must only be incurred when a new customer is activated for service.

In the most prominent example, Cox plans to use backup batteries in its E-MTA units when it conducts a market trial of its new VoIP product in Roanoke, Virg. near the end of the year. Bill Dame, senior manager of network switch engineering for Cox, said the batteries will provide 10 hours of standby power and four hours worth of talk time.

"The batteries have come a long way in the last two years," said Dianna Mogelgaard, director of product development for Cox. She noted that the batteries have evolved from large lead varieties to much smaller yet more powerful lithium ion models.

Even with cheaper battery systems available, though, several major MSOs are not exactly rushing out to offer emergency power backup for their IP telephony deployments right away. Take Time Warner Cable, the cable pioneer in residential VoIP service. Although Time Warner launched commercial service in Portland, Maine last winter, now has more than 4,000 VoIP customers there and plans to introduce service in three other markets this fall, the cable operator is not yet employing a backup power solution.

"We're still talking to people," said a Time Warner spokesman. "It's still kind of early. We're still looking for the right solution."

Likewise, Cablevision Systems, which is readying a rollout of its OptimumVoice IP telephony service to more than 4 million homes in the New York metro area this fall, will not initially use back-up batteries. Instead, the company spokesman said, Cablevision is mulling over offering battery backup as an optional, add-on service by the end of next year.

Time Warner and Cablevision executives defend their companies' lackadaisical power backup approaches by arguing that consumers don't expect lifeline phone service from their cable provider, even when it's marketed as a primary-line service. Company officials insist that cable telephony customers are much more interested in other service aspects,

such as cheaper rates, unlimited dialing and the various calling features.

"Most of our customers have cell phones and powered cordless phones so it's not a priority item for them," the Cablevision spokesman said. To the point, during the East Coast blackout and the hurricane, many RBOC customers found themselves without phone service, not realizing that their cordless phones wouldn't work during a power outage.

In Cablevision's VoIP trial on western Long Island earlier this year, the company spokesman said, customers did not stress the need for emergency power backup. "It was not the pressing issue you might think," he said.

The Time Warner spokesman concurred. "The RBOCs seem to be trying to make a big issue out of it (powering)," he said. "But that's just not ringing true with our customers."

Cox officials say their cable customers aren't making a big deal about backup power either. But, based on their years of experience with circuit-switched service, they still think it's an important service reliability feature to provide right now.

"Our perception locally is that it does make a difference, at least in Roanoke," Dame said. "If you launch the service and lose the customer, you're never going to get him back."

Mogelgaard put it somewhat differently. "I think we're all seeing similar trends," she said. "But we want to start conservatively."

Fortunately for the MSOs, it doesn't appear that either the big Northeast power outage or Hurricane Isabel disrupted their nascent IP telephony operations too much. In Time Warner's case, for instance, both the power outage and the hurricane spared Portland so emergency backup did not become an issue there.

Nevertheless, Time Warner, Cablevision and other MSOs may ultimately have to follow Cox's lead. As cable operators transform themselves into phone companies, consumers may expect them to perform just like phone companies, no matter what technologies they use or other services they deliver.

"I would say that this is a new area for them (cable operators) to be thinking about," Axberg said. "They've never thought of themselves as a lifeline service before. But that's changing."

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