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Testing and getting certified on the network

May 29, 2009 — 1:41pm ET | By [Mike Dano](#)

Despite grand pronouncements by industry players to open networks and infuse wireless into all manner of electronic gewgaws, the actual down-and-dirty process for testing and certifying new wireless devices has remained relatively unchanged in recent years.

And this situation exists despite the billions of dollars invested in wireless data networks and the market's clear evolution from a voice-only model to an everything-with-a-wireless-module scenario.

Of course, innovative wireless devices are still hitting the market at an unprecedented pace. M2M firm Digi International has shepherded such diverse devices as a prisoner-tracking bracelet (similar to one used by the once-homebound Martha Stewart); a vehicle-tracking module that can immobilize a car if the owner hasn't paid the bills; and a performance-monitoring modem that can track and record a Nascar in real time. All of these devices had to pass through a testing and certification process that is designed to fully vet increasingly complex gadgets.

The wireless industry's testing and certification procedure actually begins inside standards bodies, which must referee competing proposals in order to codify a standard. Then market players--such as wireless carriers--can implement those standards as they see fit.

This creates a number of certification steps for gadget vendors: They must adhere to a particular standard (and in some cases a particular standard for a particular spectrum band) and they must make sure they implement that standard according to a particular carrier's whims. Add into the mix intellectual-property licensing issues, FCC mandates for electronics performance and the basic business tenet to beat the competition, and the entire mix becomes difficult at best.

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So what does this actually mean in real-world terms? It means that chipset suppliers such as Qualcomm and module suppliers such as ST-Ericsson, Sierra Wireless and others must make sure that their components are competitively priced, aligned with technological standards and kosher with whatever intellectual property is applicable. (In the case of LTE, it's not even yet clear what patents are relevant.)

Then, the device vendors that purchase those components must build their device and pass through the FCC's testing process before they can even get into a specific carrier's testing queue. On the GSM side, CTIA manages a testing framework called PTCRB that vendors must pass through on their way to GSM operators like AT&T Mobility and T-Mobile USA. On the CDMA side, there's the CDMA Certification Forum, and then CDMA carriers like Sprint Nextel or Verizon Wireless.

Through testing and certification labs (either of the in-house or third-party variety), carriers ensure these devices operate as expected. The key question is whether the device will behave-- meaning, that it won't create an excessive amount of traffic on the network. "Certification becomes much more important in a mobile environment because you've got interference and handoff requirements," says Robert Syputa, a partner and senior analyst with marketing research and analysis firm Maravedis.

And, naturally, there's a bunch of paperwork to fill out too.

But the key to the equation, says Digi's Chad Bohlmann, is to make sure to get your device into a carrier's queue in the spring, so as not to get lost in the crush of fall devices hoping for a release during the critical fourth-quarter holiday shopping season.

However, there may be a light at the end of the tunnel for firms exhausted by the reams of paperwork and months of tweaking necessary to get to market. According to Ericsson's [Arun Bhikshesvaran](#), Ericsson and the GSM Association are pushing a program called the "Common Identity for Mobile Broadband" with a goal of creating a single certification process for GSM-path operators. Bhikshesvaran likened the program to the WiFi Alliance's testing and certification program for that technology.

Although it remains to be seen whether the CIMB effort from Ericsson and the GSMA plays out, the explosion of non-traditional wireless devices--from the Kindle to the netbook--likely will have a major impact on testing and certification programs initially designed for a relatively small number of voice-only phones.

For more on the embedded testing and certification, check out the FierceMarkets Embedded Wireless Device virtual event June 9. There will be a panel on the [embedded device testing at 12:30 p.m. EST](#).

Article updated June 8, 2009.

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