

“We find it troubling that those who are profiting most from the development of African telecommunications are not national governments but rather third party vendors”

Patrick Truss spoke to **Jaime Dickinson**, President and COO of NewCom International – who expanded on the issues important to communications infrastructures within the African market, and explained how his company plans to address the many challenges

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eStrategies Africa: Could we just start by asking how important the African market is to NewCom International? How large a part do robust, reliable communications streams have to play in the modern economy, particularly in Africa?

Jaime Dickinson: Business with our African customers currently accounts for about 40 per cent of NewCom’s overall revenue, and this proportion has shown continual growth since we first established a presence on the continent, making it a top priority in terms of sales projections, product development, and customer service. However, when we consider the rapid evolution of digital convergence globally, and the benefits it could potentially bring to other regions in terms of efficiencies and economic growth, we find it troubling that those who are profiting most from the development of African telecommunications are not national governments but rather third party vendors. It seems to us that long-distance assets are being exploited by international carriers and not by governments, a situation which needs to change if Africa is to capitalise fully on development and re-invest the proceeds in what is much-needed communications infrastructure.

eSA: Does the nature of the globalised marketplace mean that effective, efficient communication is more important to commercial enterprises than ever before? If so then what opportunities does this offer to your company?

JD: The only real obstacle to the development of a truly globalised market place is the absence of effective communications infrastructures in certain areas. After a significant target market or population has been provided with connectivity, the natural response to a market push means that trading, monetary exchange, and logistical issues are resolved more easily than before. What we see happening today is a collection of disorganised efforts made by different players aiming to provide Internet access; hence the evolution of their market activity is itself disorganised and regularly interrupted. This situation brings with it huge opportunities for companies like NewCom, who engage

in direct communications with African governments and organisations and provide satellite-based communications infrastructure in a more organised and efficient way. The goal is to help them play with durable, efficient, and reliable mechanisms; not just to offer short-term services here and there to the main current players in the Internet access market.

eSA: Are the priorities of your public and private sector clients radically different? Is it the case that public sector clients have a greater focus on reliability and cost-effectiveness than their private sector counterparts, or do they have similar priorities?

JD: All our customers in Africa look for cost-effectiveness, reliability, and

solutions. In a different context, deregulation and allowing the free rhythm of the market is beneficial. Unfortunately we have not seen a particularly rapid evolution in the region because resources are still being wasted. The challenges involved in enhancing a region's telecommunications infrastructure may seem overwhelming at first for those companies that aim to address them, but we believe that the adoption of a more integrated approach will make it more feasible. This has grown out of a general recognition of the inadequacies of the existing situation; hundreds of providers have wasted enormous amounts of money; in large part because vendors typically don't talk to their counterparts, which in turn prevents them from combining efforts and saving resources.

requests for proposals from the public sector and third party vendors. But even with smaller projects we encourage our customers to provide as much information as possible about their network and needs. We are proud of our ability to always offer a personalised service and suggest efficient solutions which add value for our customers. Nevertheless, in the hurry to achieve service activation, some customers simply refuse to provide additional information; perhaps because they lack a deeper understanding of those solutions they have at their disposal. Our responsibility is to help them learn and make the most of what is out there, even if it means not making the sale – this is worth it in the long term.

eSA: Does your company work mainly to enhance existing solutions or to develop entirely new ones? What technical challenges does the issue of legacy infrastructure pose to your company? Is legacy infrastructure a major issue in Africa?

JD: We are very eclectic and creative when it comes to connectivity solutions and integration. Our vendor relations are very strong and we share and update our portfolio of solutions as often as possible; therefore most of our offerings feature carefully customised solutions based on both traditional and enhanced technologies provided by multiple sources, including satellite backbone providers, satellite equipment manufacturers, network equipment manufacturers, IP transport architecture providers, and software providers – particularly open source software providers. With this in mind, we try to find ways to recycle and maximise legacy infrastructure whenever possible, and provide our customers with comparisons of short versus long term costs so as to help them make informed decisions. There needs to be a balance between optimisation efforts and investment on innovation if we are to use resources efficiently.

eSA: Does delivering communications via satellite, IP and fibre help you provide a robust, reliable service? Is it important for you to avoid being too dependent on one particular means of communication?

JD: We are a network and connectivity infrastructure provider, so our mission is precisely to create those means of

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quality in that order, regardless of their size. Only a few large providers put more emphasis on disaster recovery and business continuity. Nevertheless the lack of effective regulation and enforcement in the communications sector has, we feel, led to a situation where the needs of the customer are not the priority. In this environment one vendor is born, takes its piece of the pie, switches between providers, and then disappears, leaving their customer base at the mercy of a market that does not seem to evolve for the benefit of the end user. This situation can also lead to other significant problems, like Internet abuse and fraud.

eSA: Do you believe that large-scale infrastructure projects offer an effective way to alleviate the current economic crisis? Should we be looking to invest in, and develop, fundamental infrastructure like global communications networks?

JD: As we discussed earlier, the relative absence of formal, reliable infrastructure is the main reason behind the proliferation of informal economies and technological

On the other hand, satellite communications nowadays offer interconnectivity solutions that require less by way of infrastructure investment and long term commitment than terrestrial networks; especially for dangerous regions where such an infrastructure would be at the mercy of thieves and terrorists. We are convinced that the development of a well-structured underlying communications infrastructure, based on a balanced mix of satellite and terrestrial technologies, would bring significant economic benefits.

eSA: How are you able to customise your solutions to meet the specific needs of your clients? With this in mind is it particularly crucial to assess their precise needs at an early stage of the process?

JD: We strive to ensure that every product and service has its own commercial procedure so as to increase activation and provisioning effectiveness; however, network architecture related services always require some level of customisation, particularly when dealing with large scale projects and



Jamie Dickinson in conversation with Hon. Benjamin Ntim, at the recent Cape Town 2008 event

communication. In this era of digital convergence, we don't really see any way to avoid dependency on communications. It's a modern reality; with a rhythm determined by governments, communication providers, and real people who are demanding more and more services. We are part of the equation and try to be a positive catalyst so that our customers' communications infrastructure is diverse, secure, and flexible.

eSA: Does the broad-based nature of your solutions mean you are able to adapt quickly to unexpected events – i.e. natural disasters – and still be able to provide a reliable service? Is this a particularly important requirement in terms of the African market?

JD: NewCom International provides disaster recovery and business continuity solutions. From emergency response organisations to corporate business continuity implementations, our customers have always had the chance to count on us for rapid recovery of their infrastructure. The beauty of satellite communications

lies in its ubiquity and ease of deployment. Compared to other connectivity solutions such as terrestrial backbone, in which a major failure may take not hours, but rather days or weeks to solve, satellite services are the first choice as backup solutions because there are less points of failure. The range of solutions is very wide, from single and inexpensive VSAT implementations for branches or corporate offices, to large pipes for ISPs and telco providers. This is especially important for Africa customers, some of whom already use satellite as their primary communications channel because of its proven reliability and the improvements it brings over existing terrestrial connectivity providers.

eSA: How important is the company's location to your prospects of meeting your clients' global communications needs? Do you have any plans to further expand your operational base?

JD: NewCom's headquarters are in the US, while we also have points of presence in the UK and Singapore, from where we

serve our growing customer base. This has helped us expand our operations across the world to a point where we are planning to establish a local point of presence to provide distribution and support to our Africa customers by the early part of 2009.

eSA: Finally, does the rapidly-evolving nature of the communications sector mean that you have to focus on ongoing technological innovation to stay at the head of your field? What do you anticipate will be the next stage of development?

JD: As stated before, digital convergence is happening, whether we facilitate it or not. African governments and key players today, more than ever before, have a brilliant opportunity to realise economic growth and international penetration by taking the lead with coordinated infrastructure projects and concrete initiatives aimed at providing connectivity. We are ready to help them do that, with new technologies, optimised applications, inexpensive collaboration solutions, and our recognised experience on fast and robust deployments. **eS**