

the sky is not the limit

Thaicom's entry into Africa, made possible by its TC-6 satellite, is one of its most promising ventures to date says CEO Suphajeer Suthumpun. By KERRY DIMMER

On a clear dusky night or the dawning of a new African day, you might look up at the sky and see what appears to be a shooting star. If it takes roughly 15 minutes to traverse the horizon, what you are actually witnessing is one of up to 5 000 operational satellites that provide the earth with navigation, weather, research and communications services orbiting.

By the end of this year there will be at least one more satellite in space, launched by Thailand-based Thaicom, who also gave the world its first broadband satellite. The significance of this satellite, called TC-6, is that it will provide Central and East African countries, and Asia, with a regional beam giving telecom and broadcast operators a full range of communication services.

Thaicom's CEO Suphajeer Suthumpun says TC-6 activity will be marketed as Africom-1 and is just the start of the company's foray into the region. 'Africa is growing at a significant pace in terms of video, internet and mobile services. We expect the continent to be one of our key markets, and we feel confident that we can capture the increasing demands and fill up our capacity within three years,' she says.

As with most business ventures, there are short- and long-term plans. For Thaicom the immediate objective is to provide services to

the Central African telecoms segment, especially mobile and internet backhaul applications. However, the company's long-term plans are particularly interesting.

'We believe that while the broadcast segment will become a dominant player in Africa, we are gearing up to offer not only satellite bandwidth (or transponders) rental, but also to create an end-to-end value-added services platform for customers. This means that ultimately, through Thaicom, we can provide a holistic one-stop package in Africa to also take care of the continent's needs for pay-TV, direct-to-home, VSAT (two-way satellite ground station), and cellular trunking (expands cellular coverage and diminishes chances of dropped calls).'

There are three key elements that Thaicom has included in its strategy to penetrate Africa. The first is to leverage its strategic relationship with current partners and customers and to create new ones.

Secondly it will focus on country markets and communications solutions for those, while also targeting segment customers such as government entities.

The third strategy is to apply Thaicom's 20 years of experience in the Asian market in an African context. 'Developing markets is where we excel. Before we enter a country or design a satellite beam to provide services to a

specific territory we do an enormous amount of in-depth research both internally and externally. We look to maximise our resources and do so by undertaking sound market research and building strong business cases for each of the regions where we feel our solutions will be readily accepted and of benefit to consumers,' says Suthumpun.

This is evidenced by Thaicom's presence in East Africa. Over the past few years it has directed the Global Beam from its Thaicom 5 satellite to the region to allow a number of companies to reach European and Asian audiences. Additionally it provided cellular backhaul for some African-based operators. In due course Thaicom intends to open offices on the continent to provide on-the-ground solutions for its customers and partners because the organisation believes in working within homelands to help with the development of down- and up-stream solutions.

Suthumpun says: 'It's time to expand our fleet of satellites and start looking at regions where our unique skills and expertise can be utilised to provide world-class services. We are one of only a few global operators that has experience with both broadcast and broadband satellites.

'This, combined with our extensive knowledge of the Asian Pacific region and the markets in Europe, Africa and

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central Asia, has allowed us to build a strong culture of excellence in technology.

'We also have the passion to develop innovative solutions, and a knack for initiating new ideas, combined with flexibility to meet customer needs in finding the right solution for them. Moreover Thaicom has a strong focus on our people and this is where our strength lies.'

Suthumpun finds managing employees one of the most challenging, but enjoyable, aspects of her role as CEO. 'It is up to me to ensure that everyone is motivated and working towards a common goal. We have a diverse group of people because of the facets of our operations, which have brought together a large number of people from nations with varying cultures and different generations. When we want to communicate and motivate, we develop separate approaches for each of the groups.'

Suthumpun, with her background in global technology services, takes a visionary coaching approach to her leadership. 'I think this style allows people to experiment and have learning experiences that will strengthen their skills and knowledge.

'At the same time, and by guiding the exchange of ideas so that they can embrace a five- or 10-year vision, a common goal is achieved, which makes the chance of success much higher and results in a sense of accomplishment and pride.' This sense of pride has emerged dramatically, even more so since

Suthumpun joined the company in 2011. The company was operating at a loss for many years, but has enjoyed two years of continuous positive returns.

'The value of this is two-fold. Obviously there is the physical side of being profitable, but it also addresses the psychological importance of profitability that affects employees who had been concerned about their, and the company's, future.'

Businesswise Thaicom has done exceptionally well. Some of those successes include an increase in bandwidth and transponder sales on its existing satellites, the conclusion of a deal with China for Thaicom's Ipostar broadband satellite, moving from a product-based to a function-based system for its satellite sales and operations, and a revamp of its foreign operations structures. The future launches of two satellites, T-6 and T-7, are also sure to add to this list of achievements.

Rebranding has also been addressed, internally and externally, which Suthumpun believes brought about greater buy-in from all stakeholders in reaching goals.

'We are also in the process of promoting the core values of Thaicom to employees as these reflect who we are and what we aim to do.

'When everyone comprehends what we stand for and the things we strive for, we will create in them a sense of pride in their activities and in their company, which will in turn lead to Thaicom becoming a

point of pride for the people of Thailand and the establishment of [the company] as a valuable national asset. That, ultimately, is what I am aiming for.'

To keep a company fresh and play a leading role in the development and offering of satellite solutions is an immensely tough task, which is why Thaicom embraces and motivates collaborations as a means of identifying new technologies and solutions.

'We depend on our extensive business relations and partnerships with our customers and suppliers, in addition to monitoring developments in the industry so that we can stay abreast of changes in technology.

'Our engineers and marketing teams also look at other industries that might offer potential new ideas or solutions that can be adapted or applied to satellite communications,' says Suthumpun.

'In combination with our people-focused approach, we continue to build and develop a strong organisation that has a reputation for excellence in technology. I believe that a company is only as good as the trust people place in its products, services and its management team.

'With this mindset applied in Africa, our clients will be able to experience true value from Thaicom's broadcast, internet and trunking systems as well as solution design and implementation excellence for those various applications,' she says. **AD**