

CHOPRA'S nirvana

THE PARTNER OF CHOICE IN EMERGING MARKETS, TECNOTREE'S BSS/OSS SOLUTIONS HELP BUSINESSES FLOURISH BY SERVING TELECOMS COMPANIES IN EVERY STEP OF THEIR GROWTH.

BY KERRY DIMMER

Almost

every country in Africa has a Tecnotree presence, thanks to COO Atul Chopra's spirit for adventure and exploration of

emerging markets. He connected with those markets where others sensed or experienced failure and in the process built a considerable reputation for delivering cutting-edge Business and Operations Support Systems (BSS/OSS) and Value-Added Services (VAS) to telecom operators.

Chopra is not bragging when he says that Tecnotree is currently the number one partner of choice in emerging markets. Rather, he says it with a sense of pride and accomplishment that, from acquiring a small boutique company in India some 10 years ago, he uncovered and conquered a niche market in emerging economies that evolved 'more by accident than design'.

Lifetree Convergence Limited was Chopra's first, and only, foray into technology business ownership, but the risk, as he saw it, was minimal. 'My specialist area as an investment banker was in telecoms, so I already had considerable insight and knowledge as to how the industry operates, what its challenges were and where growth was needed and opportunities could be found,' he says.

'Besides, it became my quest to move from a moneyed environment to one of wealth. The world of banking and investment may get you a lot of money but it isn't the same as wealth, which becomes a much bigger concept when you want to create something that has a sustainable revenue business model.'

In the early days of Lifetree, Chopra identified billing as a real headache for telecom organisations, and set out to explore the advanced markets of North America and Japan. These, however, were already saturated. 'It would've been a long-haul process for a young Indian product company to crack through those well-ensconced markets,' says Chopra.

The breakthrough came for Tecnotree when it signed with DST in Brunei for the implementation of five subsidiaries on a single platform. It was a massive step for the small company, one that culminated in the identification of emerging markets as a business focus.

'One of our first African deals with our BSS product was with MTN in Nigeria. I generated a lot of activity over the phone from Bangalore,' says Chopra. 'It was a real eye-opener for us. We realised that our methods and style of service delivery worked particularly well in emerging economies. Try the same thing in Europe or America and it might backfire.'

Celtel and Telma (Madagascar), Accelon and Starcomms (Nigeria), Emtel (Mauritius), MTC (Namibia) and other large telecom organisations, soon added to the growing list of Lifetree customers, with MTN's operations remaining a key client that Chopra personally continues to manage. By 2009 Lifetree's success and growth had caught the interest of Finnish-based Tecnomen.

Tecnomen and Lifetree merged to form Tecnotree, represented the infinite possibilities of future-ready solutions that now include voice and video services, PMR Messaging, NGM platform and Media Server products. Its BSS/OSS solutions focus on charging and billing, subscriber management, partner management and other related services.

Tecnotree has a worldwide footprint and despite its reach, employs only 800 people across 20 locations. 'Lean and mean' some might suggest, but Chopra

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knows different. 'Tecnotree's success is a consequence of strong customer orientation. We focus on partnerships with our customers rather than just being a vendor and we're constantly working with them to build performance values for all parties. I can honestly say that most of our business relationships in Africa have reached a point of intimacy and trust which gives us a unique edge on any competitor.'

This obviously impacts Chopra enormously, but he is comfortable with maintaining the formula that he has implemented from his days in investment banking, which is to recognise three stakeholders. In terms of priority they are: the customers, the people in the business and the shareholders. 'These three are tightly interwoven because you can't build a business unless you have strong relationships.'

Such strong relationships are enhanced by Chopra being available 24/7. 'I am always on the move, listening to my customers, finding out what we can do to improve our proposition for new products and services, but I remain aware that our own company performance is still important. I have a great respect for numbers, that's probably the chartered accountant in me.'

Chopra is motivated daily by the innumerable interactions he has, be those with customers or his team. He explains that he is easily inspired by the closure of a deal because that translates into a happy customer. 'Our "family" tree is another great motivator, the conversations I have with our team members are just as rewarding and serve to keep the roots of Tecnotree strong and healthy.'

The same is also said by Chopra of Tecnotree's African customers. 'Africa is completely different to India, for example, where the focus is, generally speaking, on frugality. African emerging markets are very quality conscious and in our experience this dispels the myth that the continent is seeking cheap solutions; they rate customer service far higher than most expect. You just have to look at the way South Africa managed, planned and hosted a very successful Fifa World Cup. We all feel extremely proud of our African connection as a result of this marvellous event.'

Chopra is also excited about two new initiatives that Tecnotree will be launching in the future, both developed in conjunction with some of the company's key customers. He confirms that one will be on the CRM front, ideally suited for African conditions and needs; the other is a Unified Product Catalogue.

The involvement of Tecnotree customers and employees in product development is typical of Chopra's management style. 'One constant message that goes out to my staff regularly, is that they must have their ears to the ground and eyes towards the horizon. We need to ensure that we do not miss out on valuable feedback from grassroots level, nor lose sight of the bigger picture in front of us.'

That bigger picture includes seeing Tecnotree on the top of Gartner's magic quadrant in the BSS/OSS space. In the meantime, he wants to express his gratitude. 'We are very grateful for the opportunity to work with our clients and their part in helping to create a very unique and successful business. To my colleagues – my thanks for working so hard to get us to the level we're at.'

But his final message is the strongest and is directed at world business. 'Have belief in emerging markets, for they hold the key to success, and very importantly, the next few decades belong to Africa.' ●