



From strength-to-strength

iWay is the flagship brand of the communications solutions provided by AFSAT Communications. With over 20 years experience in the telecommunications sector, AFSAT continues to grow from strength to strength. Helen Jameson speaks to Job Ndege, General Manager of AFSAT about their services, successes and the challenges still facing communications providers in Africa today.



Job Ndege, General Manager of AFSAT

Question: Congratulations on Afsat's recent award at the World Communications Awards recently and of course iWay's award for West Africa's Best Internet Service Company. What are the secrets of your success? What is it that makes AFSAT and iWay so unique in today's market?

Job Ndege: The secret of our success is based on the values that we espouse to as a company, namely: the customer, excellence, know-how, stewardship, leadership and integrity.

At Afsat we focus on our customer's needs and develop solutions based on this.

In order to keep to these high standards, we develop our people as a key pillar to business growth and success through

continuous training of our staff and distributors.

Afsat has a unique position in the market in that it has a Pan-African presence both directly and through its partners. The service coverage is also Pan-African. iWay Service gives a user guaranteed speeds all the time at the cost of a shared service. To ensure quality and utmost customer satisfaction, we work with the customer to ensure that the link serves the intended use, be it for business application use or purely as an Internet access product.

Question: iWay's broadband service is hugely successful in Africa. How significant is the demand for broadband via satellite in the region?



Job Ndege: There is a growing demand for broadband Internet as more users are beginning to rely on the Internet for business use. Whereas in the past users would not object to any form of Internet link quality; the demand now is for reliable broadband Internet.

Due to the unreliable nature of the other terrestrial based Internet solutions, satellite-based broadband has continued to be in high demand. In addition, the ubiquitous nature and ease of deployment of VSAT technology makes it very desirable.

Question: Given the success of your service, does iWay have any plans for expansion in the coming months and years?

Job Ndege: In tandem with our vision: "To be the leading communication solutions provider in Africa through the provision of world class, efficient and cost effective internet and intra-corporate connectivity solutions", we will continue to expand both our presence in the continent and the services we offer. We will venture into new markets and expand in those that we are in. Our strategy will be driven by the customers needs.

Afsat has recently completed a successful merger with Mweb Africa. This brings with it access to more territories in the Southern Africa region.

Question: What new trends and developments do you see emerging in the African region at present?

Job Ndege: In terms of the business environment, Africa has seen increased democratisation and economic boom. At the same time more Governments are embracing ICT development as a key plank towards industrialisation. Consequently the ICT sector will continue to be liberalised in most African countries.

In technology, use of satellite transmission by non-government and the military has been allowed. There will be growth in fibre coverage within the countries as well as links to the global fibre network and widespread deployment of wireless (especially CDMA, WiFi and WiMax) technology for data.

The VSAT market will continue to grow as more businesses realise that VSAT offers services that are a cut above the rest in relation to speed, reliability and security.

There will also be increased demand and usage of the Internet. In the past, Africa would download much more than upload. That ratio is narrowing.

We also envisage consolidations with firms merging to enhance reach and products.

Question: What are the challenges faced by companies deploying broadband

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services in Africa?

Job Ndege: Broadband companies face two key challenges. The first is Government bureaucracy and levies. Many countries still levy duty on telecommunications equipment. Some countries also still charge the end-

user large amounts of money for terminal equipment deployment.

Secondly, there is the cost of maintaining the infrastructure. Terrestrial based broadband operators find it very expensive to maintain the infrastructure as there have



There is a growing demand for broadband Internet as more users are beginning to rely on the Internet for business use. Photo courtesy of iStockphoto.com.



not been deliberate efforts to setup regional and inter regional backbone/trunking services that can be shared by several players. Therefore operators need to maintain independent backbones.

Question: Do you see the Digital Divide closing in the region at all? Are more people gaining more access to ICTs?

Job Ndege: Yes. There are efforts by governments to spur the use of ICT. Initiatives like e-government, e-schools, and digital villages will all spur the growth of ICT and close the digital divide. Governments are also offering incentives for ICT infrastructure development, so that the reach can be widened to areas considered to be non-profitable.

Question: Lack of bandwidth is the critical issue in Africa at present. What does iWay feel must be done to overcome this issue and what impact is the lack of bandwidth having on the industry at present?

Job Ndege: Satellite operators need to encourage customers with legacy equipment to convert to modern ones. This has a potential of saving half the capacity that is currently being utilised. Africa needs to seriously work on more deployment of its own satellites tailored to its requirements

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Lack of bandwidth inhibits growth of the broadband Internet. Existing operators often need to setup new operations to expand their services; this requires huge capital investments.

In some situations expansion is not possible at all. This scarcity of bandwidth spurs price increases in the market as the little bandwidth available is sold at premium prices to the operators. Operators are then unable to offer better prices to the consumers.

Question: What role does VSAT continue to play in African communications? Will it continue to be a pivotal means of delivering broadband and to which customers?

Job Ndege: Due to the poor infrastructure,

no ubiquity and unreliability of terrestrial based solutions, VSAT based solutions will continue to play a very big role in communications in Africa. VSAT remains the only solution that offers the most reliable broadband connection and is ubiquitous.

In Africa the success of e-learning and e-governance will solely depend on VSAT technology as it the only way of affordably delivering broadcast based applications.

Question: What does 2008 hold for iWay?

Job Ndege: Early in the year we will strive to hit the 5,000 paying broadband subscriber base. iWay will also be looking at expanding its presence in the Southern Africa countries of Namibia, Swaziland and South Africa and also in the extreme West African region in countries like Liberia and Sierra Leone. ●