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Talia: promoting good works



The NGO community is increasingly using satellite to reinstate communications in disaster zones and in remote areas. Satellite Evolution speaks to Travis. T. Mooney, COO of Talia Satellite & Telecom to find out about its ambitions to serve the NGO market.

Question: Can you please begin by introducing Talia to our Readers?

Travis. T. Mooney: Talia was formed in 1997. We were a dial-up broadband ISP specialist in the Mac market in the UK. We were pretty successful and we became the largest dedicated ISP for the Apple Mac market in the country.

Two of our founders are Iraqi-Kurds and in 2003 they were very excited to go back

and help rebuild Iraq after the fall of Sadaam Hussein. They noticed immediately that there were no communications. They knew the ISP market and they knew how to enable satellite Internet, so they decided to do exactly that. We became a satellite reseller for the Middle East focusing on Hughes and Tachyon mostly and within a few years we had about approximately a thousand sites – mostly Hughes - but also a good number of Tachyon



sites throughout Iraq and the rest of the region. iDirect were a big player in the market back then and we looked around and said to ourselves that we were basically shifting boxes. And the problem with the quality of the Hughes service back then was that it had grown very quickly and there was not the capacity to back it up.

We had heard about the iDirect Virtual Network Operator (VNO) and we decided to go ahead and install the VNO system in 2005. We started off with 2.8 megahertz of space and within about a year we had come up to 40.0 megahertz of space. Space was not as hard to come by as it is now. After reaching the 40 megahertz position, we realised that, as we continued to grow, we would need to move up the iDirect food chain and get a hub. So we bought a hub and acquired our own space capacity and we built our own infrastructure.

In July 2007, we filled an entire transponder on Arabsat BADR-4 in a period of months – much faster than we ever thought we would fill it. Then we acquired some capacity on a New Skies Satellite that brought us into the food chain with New Skies and Intelsat – the big satellite operators. Now we have 12-1500 remote stations out there on about 125 megahertz of space. We have also just debuted our African services on Arabsat BADR-6 which we are very excited about. The service started on October 1 with a one-week transfer period before we commercialise the service. We have field partners already lined up in Nigeria and Kenya, in Iraq and the rest of the Middle East and we will be finding field partners in Afghanistan. One of the great things about opening up over Africa is that we can service NGOs that we have not been able to service before. Now we can focus much more on Africa. We are pleased to say that we have grown about 70 percent year on year.

Question: Earlier this year Talia introduced a new scheme for NGOs involved in disaster recovery scenarios. Can you tell us more about the 'Good Works' scheme?

Travis. T. Mooney: We actually introduced this at the Aid and Trade event in Geneva. Aid and Trade is show where people who work in support of aid organisations come to demonstrate their wares and services that they can offer.

The Good Works Scheme actually goes back to one of my friends who now works for USAID but at the time (about two years ago) he was doing field work after completing his masters in public policy. He was out in Uganda and he had a phone that was not terribly reliable and was difficult to charge. They had some VSAT equipment but what they had was totally unreliable. In the middle of this – and he was gone about six months – he had a call from his girlfriend and just

before the call cut out she told him that she was pregnant. So he was there, with no way to get back in contact. I found this out a couple of days later and I thought that surely something could be done about this kind of problem! So we began thinking about how we could expand capacity in the African market. Even if you just satisfy GSM backhaul requirements that is a huge market. But on average satellite services are expensive and even for NGOs, they are still more than we would want to charge. We talked about offering free hardware or working with the hardware manufacturer to negotiate discounts or leasing the hardware and then taking it back or putting a deposit scheme in place. We are doing whatever we can do to make it affordable and to get hardware and service out towards these locations.

The biggest selling point of VSAT has always been no matter what your local connectivity options are, you can get communications. It doesn't matter whether you are working for a charity or on an oil platform you still need regular communications that are reliable. There are a lot of GSM providers out there, especially in Africa and in a lot of places the coverage works, but in a lot of places it doesn't.

Question: Helping NGOs in difficult situations is obviously something that is close to Talia's heart. Are you finding that NGOs and other organisations are turning away from terrestrial connectivity and

towards satellite – VSAT for example?

Travis. T. Mooney: For field locations there is often no terrestrial connectivity so there is simply no option. VSAT is a totally different beast to the connectivity that we are used to. Some NGOs have access to VSAT and some don't. The guy in the field who is used to DSL has a VSAT connection that to him is very, very slow, and to the organisation it is really expensive. I don't think that in Geneva, the Red Cross is going to be opting for VSAT except to backhaul its connections to its field offices perhaps, but they are not opting for VSAT in places that are built up. In field locations, however, it is often the only option available.

Question: Has the 'Good Works' scheme been popular and which agencies have you been involved with helping? What does an aid agency have to do to access the scheme?

Travis. T. Mooney: The feedback has been very, very positive. We have a few places that have taken it up inside the Middle East already. It is being used for humanitarian efforts inside Iraq. Again, with the Middle Eastern focus that we had there has not been a great amount of opportunity that has presented itself. We have tried to spread the word, as I have said, through trade shows and we are talking to NetHope that is an organisation that does IT pooling for NGOs. We have also met with the head of the Oxfam IT initiative and all of them have said that when we reach Africa with the service they





will be very excited. That is the next step.

There is no real hard and fast rule on qualification for the Good Works Scheme. It goes without saying that larger organisations such as the Red Cross and Oxfam's charitable credentials will not be questioned. Realistically, anybody who is registered as a charity will absolutely qualify. Organisations without these credentials will be treated on a case-by-case basis. We try to treat the NGOs and charitable organisations almost like we treat our field partners. We would like to provide them with training material, we are working with the GVF and we have been talking about formulating some training schedules. We are hoping to instill enough technical know-how into the guys in the field to fix something when it goes wrong. VSAT capacity is very, very expensive and the background knowledge of how to fix a VSAT when it goes wrong is not very widespread – such as polarisation problems, for example. So this knowledge will empower them to either fix it themselves or to feedback into our support system so that we can help them make this very expensive capacity work for them.

Question: There are still misconceptions about satellite in terms of expense, latency etc. Do you believe that the satellite industry is doing enough to promote itself to the NGO community or do you think that more education is needed to highlight the many benefits of satellite connectivity in disaster situations?

Travis. T. Mooney: I know that there are a

lot of areas where the satellite community has stepped up its support of NGOs. I know that iDirect and a number of the operators in the US were very deeply involved in the Hurricane Katrina communication problems and the same thing with 9/11. I don't think that any of them are ignoring the problem by any stretch of the imagination. It's just an area that we are particularly interested in.

Question: Which areas of the Middle East and Africa are you finding most demand for your services?

Travis. T. Mooney: We have a lot of capacity spread over the Middle East and North Africa right now. There is a lot of connectivity going in and out of Iraq but it's not just Iraq. We have coverage all over continental Europe and the British Isles as well. So that combined with the coverage we will have over East and West Africa gives us a pretty good spread and I am hoping that we leverage that not only for NGOs but for corporate customers and whoever else needs connectivity.

Question: Has lack of coverage been a big issue for Talia?

Travis. T. Mooney: Capacity is absolutely the number one problem for future growth. There is no question about that. I recently attended the VSAT 2008 conference in London and capacity is once again the bugbear of the industry and a lot of people are betting on Ka-band to solve it at least in the built up areas like Western Europe, maybe the Middle East, certainly North America. But in areas that have high rain attenuation such as

Equatorial Africa you can't depend on capacity like Ku or Ka-band to provide reliable service as the rain attenuation is going to be too much. There's a lot of Ku-band being sold into these areas as it is cheap as chips compared to C-band but the reality is the C-band has a position in the market as a business solution and a reliable solution. That is why we have committed to C-band capacity going forward. I think that the only way you can guarantee capacity at this stage is to secure pre-launch capacity.

Question: Finally, in terms of the NGO angle, what does Talia hope to achieve over the coming year? Do you have plans to further extend the work you are doing in this field?

Travis. T. Mooney: That's a tricky one to answer. Of course we hope to extend it. We would love to partner an organisation like NetHope. We would love to partner directly with some of the larger NGOs and offer them an option going forward. We would hope to get into a good position as a preferred vendor. I hope that our services will be acquired in the field and I hope to be able to grow our reseller networks to be able to come in the back door and offer services that way. This is still quite new for us and I think that anything new is a challenge. We are very keen on this market and we have just signed some capacity on Arabsat 5-A which will give us Pan-African C-band coverage so that will bring us up to the next step. That will dramatically expand our ability to offer C-band throughout the continent and our ability to support NGOs as a result.



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