Leader, all the way

Dilki Wijesuriya

Since their launch in December 1996, Suntel has been steadily progressing towards their goal of being present throughout the island by year 2000. Jan Campbell, managing director of Suntel told Business Today, that they have several new products and services in store for Suntel users, in the coming months.

With Lanka Bell's advent into the market, what is your counter market strategy?

We definitely had an edge over Lanka Bell by our early launch and we would like to keep that edge. We plan to offer several new services this year which will be our main strategy. But with SLT, Lanka Bell and us in the market I think there are enough customers and enough demand not to fight too hard. There should of course be competition and we should become better and better, that is how the customer can benefit.

Mrs Larson Of Telia on her last visit to Sri Lanka told Busi- ness Today that Suntel expected to have a 20% market share. Have you achieved it?

We Will achieve it over a period of time and that means taking over a big portion of the network. The present stakes are very good. We have so far ventured into the metropolitan area and right now we are building and expanding into the greater Colombo area. The pace and installations are good and will soon be comparable with what SLT is doing. I think they do around 2000 lines per month and that is more or less what we do at present. In the next four or five years the SLT would have around 5090 market share and the other 50 would be divided between the private operators.

Since most people in colombo already have SLT connections does your market consist mainly Of the outstation and the suburbs?

No. The demand in Colombo is quite as big. Many corporate customers who have two or three SLT lines desire several more telephone connections which we can

easily provide for them.

What is your reach todate?

We have sold about 8,000 lines so far and are in the process of installing 700 to lines at the present time. We have covered greater Colombo and Mt. Lavinia. We will be going into Kegalle and Kandy in June. Next will be the north and south going down to Galle. What is the percentage of breakdowns on your phones? The normal breakdowns are fairly low. We have had teething problems and unforeseen power shortages caused long interruptions initially. But we have over-

come these problems and now the average complaints are down to around 10 per day. We correct these faults usually within 24 hours, if for any reason there is a delay we explain the circumstances to the customer and have not encountered any problems.

From your launch up to now how do you rate your progress?

When we launched we had a very high interest. Then we had some problems with the interconnect. There was a misunderstanding With the SLT when they thought we were a threat to their existence. That however was soon sorted out but it took us until the end of January to get connected to the 074 number in the SLT net- work.

After that we had problems where we did not install so many lines at the beginning, and then it started to take off but we had to work a lot to make people understand that ours was a normal land fixed line service and that there was no extra cost for the quality and prompt delivery we offered. Sales picked up in February and in March it was very good, April again was a pretty closed month but it has picked up again. As of now we have a very good response. On our hot-line we receive – 1000 – 1500 inquiries daily.

How manv branch offices do you have?

Two so far, in Nugegoda and MT.Lavinia. We will have one soon in Kandy

What is your staff strength and how do you feel about your staff?

We have around 175 employees and yes we are very happy with our local staff and not without reason. We focused very much on the human resources side when came here last summer and it was decided that we should try to build the company

with local employees. Having the knowledge and expertise we have in telecommunications we wanted to impart it to our local counterparts.

Have you done any special training sessions for your staff?

Yes, we have sent some of them to Sweden for training and we have had complete training of all personnel in service management. We have had experts coming here from Sweden who held training sessions for staff through S weeks. So we have spent quite a large sum of money on this but I consider it money well spent. are happy with our employees and I think they are happy with us, we have not had anyone leaving our services todate.

Do you have your own ex- change, if so how many lines are you geared for?

Yes. Our exchange, the base station we have in Colombo can handle up to 35,000 lines.

What technology do you use and how old is it?

We are using a world standard, a digital, enhanced cordless technology. The standard itself is very promising. A good plus in using a standard is that you can buy products and services from many different suppliers around globe. This technology has been used since 1993 but the cordless telephones and the loop technology is around 2 years old. I think so far there are around projects around the world using this technology.

Do you intend launching any new products or services in the near future could you elaborate on them?

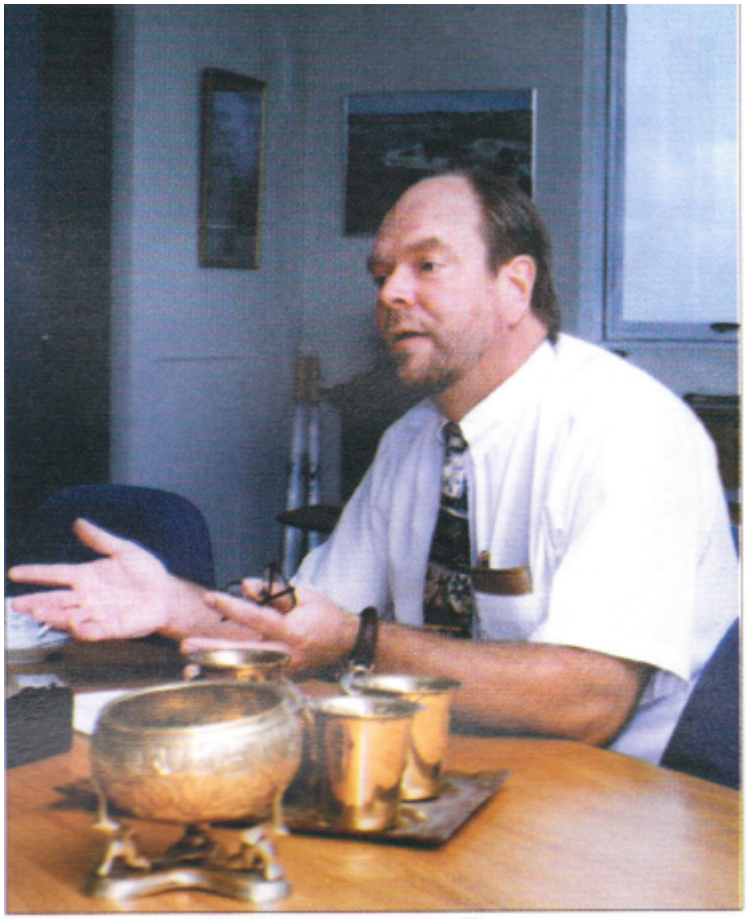
Yes. We are in the process of pre- paring for the launch of what would known as the ‘Suntel Convenience Range.’ would be offering voice and data communication with a fixed telephone line which would have a cordless telephone extension. This is a digital cordless system, which would be Of excellent quality.

What would be the price range Of such a system?

It would be slightly higher priced than the normal telephone package. We would offer a fixed line alone with one of these cordless systems for around Rs 35,000/- . But the plus in this system is that it could be used as an intercom facility. A

residence or a small office would be able to use it as a mini PABX by purchasing up to 6 other handsets. You can also have two lines connected to the network.

It is not only the technology but the design, we are offering two products one from Sweden and the other from Denmark and as you can see they are both very sleek in design.



Jan Campbell

International Direct Dialling — are you linked to any network such as Supercard?

No we do not have a separate agreement with Supercard, But all our customers ean have IDD facilities through our own network at the same rates charged by the SLT. There is no extra charge for this facility but a refundable deposit would have to be incurred by the customer.

Do you find the present up- lift in the stock market promising?

Yes, of course it is. We are very much dependent on the country’s economic growth in the future. And as it is there is some growth and that is indeed promising. The potential in Sri Lanka is very much higher than in other parts of the world.

What plans do you have for the future?

We would like to as soon as possible expand to several more areas. We will in the next two or three years mainly concentrate on rapidly building our network. Then we will follow up with new services. We have at least two other launches planned for this year, but it is too early to talk about them right now, What we would like to be is a leader in telecommunications in Sri Lanka.