News At Your Fingertips



By Udeshi Amarasinghe

Jasmine Newswire better known as JNW News is Sri Lanka’s first SMS news alert service providing instant coverage of events taking place nationally and internationally. Established in April 2006 as an experiment to determine the demand for the product, JNW News is the brainchild of Chamath Ariyadasa and Ruwan Weerakoon. Having partnered with all major mobile and CDMA service providers; JNW News alerts is now a common feature amongst portable phone users in Sri Lanka. The duo is persistent on ensuring accuracy and quality of the news items distributed. This is their story on how a small scale venture developed into one of the fastest news alert providers in the

country.

Chamath Ariyadasa is the Editor and Managing Director of JNW News, having resigned from his post as Bureau Chief for Dow Jones in Colombo; he approached his long time friend Ruwan Weerakon (Director, JNW News and Defence Correspondent of Bottom Line) to experiment with a concept of providing news alerts to mobile phones. In order to test the market the product was initially distributed to contacts and friends, which in total was about 200 people. As Ruwan Weerakon explained, “initially we were the only two employees in our company, we were the reporters, directors and peons. We had no computers, our only equipment were our two mobile phones.” Gradually, after a couple of months the duo realised that there was a demand for the product and thus in order to reach a wider and larger clientele the need to join with the mobile service providers were identified. “We have to especially thank the CEO of Mobitel, Suren Amarasekera for giving us his fullest support. Initially we used his mobile phone to demonstrate the authenticity of the news. He was extremely happy with our service”, said Chamath Ariyadasa. Thus Mobitel signed up with JNW News in June 2007 and was the first service provider to launch SMS news alerts. Soon after, Dialog and other mobile service providers including CDMA providers, Lanka Bell and Suntel joined hands with JNW News. Currently subscription to the SMS news alerts is only through mobile and CDMA phone service providers. Those who are interested in receiving the news alerts only need to type in the activation codes for activation.

The main advantage of SMS news alerts is that a person is informed on events around the country even while he is travelling or at work as it is impossible to listen to the radio or watch TV 24 hours a day. In this day and age almost everyone has a mobile phone thus they are informed of important news immediately. “You will get to know the headlines of tomorrows newspapers, today. Furthermore you will be aware if it safe to approach a certain area after a bomb explosion or travel to an area that may be flooded”, stated Ruwan. It was further noted that SMS news alerts were also beneficial for journalists as usually they are informed of an event only when they arrive at office.

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JNW News provides news alerts 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. Though mainly alerting the public on general news, JNW News also focuses on security, natural disasters and business news. The SMS alert provider distributes information that they deem are necessary for the public in their day-to-day lives. JNW News refrains from alerting people on mundane news. Identified, as a News Agency JNW News is persistent in providing authentic and qualitative news to their clientele. Speaking on the process of collection, processing and disseminating, Chamath and Ruwan emphasised the importance of verifying and sourcing news items. “Once we receive a breaking news, we verify the news item through three sources. We do have our own reporters and we have contacts with journalist around the country. However even if our own staff reports the news we verify it. A news item is released only once it is confirmed”, explained Ruwan Weerakon. Talking about what makes JNW News different, Chamath explained the guiding principles of their organisation as unbiased and independent reporting, ensuring that both sides of a story is represented, persisting on three sources for each news item and lastly ensuring that the receiver is informed of the source of the news which is always a credible source such as Military Spokespersons, Cabinet ministers and in the case of business news; the stock exchange etc. “The credibility of our news is really important to us therefore we are very strict about our sources”, said Chamath Ariyadasa. By emphasising on credible sources, JNW News has set an example in Sri Lanka, “In Sri Lanka this was not strictly adhered to but after we started other media organizations are also following this procedure”, he added.

As pioneers of SMS news alerts in Sri Lanka, Chamath and Ruwan are constantly developing the product and venturing into new arenas. Currently JNW News is negotiating with a media organization overseas in order to develop their services. Furthermore SMS news alerts are now being provided in Sinhala and Tamil despite restrictions in phone models. The dynamic duo are also looking to venture into the print, TV and radio segments of the media in order to diversify their product.

Having a clientele of over 100,000 subscribers, the response to JNW News has been positive according to the founders of the news agency. JNW News is committed to responsible reporting and ensuring the authenticity of the news they disseminate whilst their aim is to keep the public informed.