

Prioritizing Customer Service

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Mobitel, one of the top cellular operators in the market has made major inroads in providing a 'quality' service to their customers. Walter McKenzie, managing director of Mobitel told 'Business Today' that in as small a market as Sri Lanka's, people would have no difficulty in recognizing what is 'real quality'.

*** In the aftermath of the October bomb blast which devastated Colombo, what turn do you expect the country's economy to take - do you expect the blast to have any lasting repercussions on your business?**

I think that immediately after the blast our sales picked up because people who were in the midst of it felt that if they had a cellular phone in hand at the time of the crisis, they could have been in contact with their spouse, parents, girl-friends or whoever close. So in the short term it has not really affected us but the long term of course depends on the economy and how badly it is affected. I am hoping the sentiments of the press are correct, and the bomb has not wreaked as much havoc on the economy as last time. The Central Bank bomb last year affected the

economy very badly and we suffered its after effects. Immediately after that we had the power crisis to contend with that combination I think was lethal for the country. I am hoping it would not be as bad this time round.

*** As a foreign national working in a war torn country do you fear the uncertainty of life?**

Not at all. I am not afraid of anything. One would expect nothing to happen on an important date or something but otherwise I'd probably be more nervous working in the UK with all the IRA activity that goes on there.

*** Do you feel in the present circumstances, that key organizations in Colombo's business community such as the Colombo Stock Exchange the SEC, BOI, banks and several other government departments should be decentralized and not housed in one building?**

I don't think that is the right reaction to this situation. In my opinion what the city of Colombo needs is a few more high rise buildings and better traffic conditions.

***Considering the very aggressive marketing strategies adopted by the fixed line operators and two other cellular operators already in the market-do you feel there are enough human resources, especially in the marketing field to do the rounds?**

Definitely not-there certainly aren't enough. This

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is why unrealistic packages are being offered to the few there are, which has helped inflate the market. Not just marketing personnel but I feel getting good finance people here is also a problem-especially at a senior level. There may be Sinhala speaking people with good marketing skills around but we need our sales people to be English articulate as well as have the required skills. The

combination is very hard to find.

***Are you looking for special skills in those marketing cellular phones or would any type of brand marketing experience suffice?**

No. Any type of brand marketing experience would do. If they have marketed one product they could market another. It is just that there aren't enough skilled people. I think this is because marketing itself has not been a very sophisticated industry in Sri Lanka as opposed to India where it has developed much more rapidly. Here, competition itself hasn't been very intense. But as markets open up, deregulation and privatization set in, there will be more skills coming into the country.

***Judging by the recent advertising campaigns of cellular operators, where they appear to directly challenge one another, would you say an 'all time war' has been declared?**

Yes but I think it is healthy war.

***With all the different facilities and packages on offer - how does a customer differentiate between what a cellular operator says is 'quality' and 'real quality'?**

Colombo as you know is a very small market and people get to know what goes on very quickly. If someone says they have a wonderful network when they really don't-people get to know. You can get away with it in a country like Australia but not here. As for packages anyone with a little intelligence would be able to work out what is best for them. I agree it is getting a little bit more complex with the different rates offered for peak and off peak hours, but I don't think it is too difficult.

***What is your target market-Would you say your service is targeted mainly at the high user or is that not so?**

No it is not. Our rates are high on some packages and less in others. When you consider the peak and off peak rates and what we offer as rebate, our Corporate 'A' package is the best and definitely the cheapest for corporate customers. Then there is our Rs 99/- package which is one of the cheapest for the low end user. In between we may not have as cheap a range but then our budget package, which

offers free calls, is one of the most popular and widely used.

***How much are you affected by the fixed line operators have you lost many of your outstation customers who may now be using either Suntel or Lanka Bell?**

Yes. This has affected us very badly. Our revenue is dropping and we intend taking this problem up with the minister shortly.

***What is the solution you are looking for, to this revenue problem?**

User-paying, that is the only solution. It is not a means of competing with the wireless loop operators nor a case of robbing Peter to give Paul, but user paying will increase the total traffic being carried by everyone's network - it would be a general increase overall. This I think is the most sensible and equitable way to charge people. We really need this system in order to sustain-if user pay is not set in motion we would have problems.

***In your advertising campaign for international roaming, you use the tag line 'Experience true international roaming with Up & Away' - could you explain?**

What Mobitel means by true international roaming is that we charge our customers the local rates of the country they are visiting. Also if you want to call a neighboring country from the place you are visiting you pay that country's international call rates i.e. you are not linked or connected back to Sri Lanka every time you call international. That's the difference between Dialog GSM and us. With their system you get to retain your local phone number but you get charged international call rates. In 'Up & Away' you don't get to retain your local number. On landing at your destination you are given a number for the cell phone you are carrying and away you go. If however,

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a customer wants to retain his local phone number we can do it through our network but then we have to charge international rates because what happens then is calls are diverted through our local network, making it much more expensive.

***Are you planning to convert your network to digital in the near future?**

Yes, we are now installing a technology called ‘digital ready’ within our network. But we will launch this only when there is a demand for a digital service. Right now the demand is not big enough to warrant us converting our network.

***If you convert, does this mean your customers would not be able to use the cellular phones they are currently using?**

Yes, they can use their analog phones and continue to have an analog service. But if a customer requires a digital service they would have to buy a digital cellular phone.

***What are the advantages in having a digital phone?**

Much longer battery life and those who really want security will have the advantage of untapped calls. There is also room to provide several very capable packages. Area type packages, where a package is formulated to operate within a certain area, facility to move within packages if necessary as well as identification of a call’s origin etc.

Would your system be identical to GSM?

We are using the same technology which is called TDMA, but our system is not compatible with GSM i.e. a GSM phone cannot be connected to our network.

What are your plans for the immediate future?

Well, the most important thing we are doing here in Mobitel is enhancing our customer service. We've done quite a lot in this area and we are continuing to do more. We have two big parking areas next door now, for our customers as well as an area for our staff. We have two agents Abans and Metropolitan and we are shortly to launch a third i.e. Singer. We are also trying to get Interconnect which we do not have at the moment. If we have Interconnect we can offer an even better service to our customers.