

BLUE SKY

SKY'S THE LIMIT



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Blue Sky Satellite Communications is the go-to solutions provider for telecommunications across Africa: we spoke to founder and CEO Pedro Camacho about the company, its markets, and its vision for the future

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Founder and CEO
Pedro Camacho

Pedro Camacho is an entrepreneur with real vision. 16 years ago when he founded Blue Sky Satellite Communications, the industry was distinctly niche in character, though even then it was becoming obvious that it was going to be a key to growth in Africa. With very little in the way of fixed telecoms infrastructure on the continent, and that but poorly maintained and unreliable, cellphones quickly became the enabling technology, and Africa started to lead the innovative ways it is used today, famously making mobile finance mainstream. That worked well in populated areas but as a pan-African solution it had and still has its limitations.

To connect the most remote areas Camacho realised that the future lay with satellites. He founded Blue Sky in 1997 as a one stop shop for all corporate and institutional satellite needs, based on excellence of service delivery and customised solutions for every client, large or small.

The company has today built up a track record of service in most African jurisdictions with products ranging from satellite phones to global internet access, with both mobile and fixed services such as 3G access, fibre connectivity, and corporate Wi-Fi. Blue Sky Satellite Communications is an approved service provider of Iridium, Inmarsat, Thuraya, VSAT, GSM, 3G Signal Amplifiers and many other brands of satellite equipment and other telecommunication products. It holds operating licences in territories

throughout Africa and the Middle East.

At the time of start-up there were only one or two service providers in the market but the service they provided was not really adequate. “There was a gap – I saw it and took it, and differentiated my service by giving more attention to detail,” says Camacho. “We service many vertical and horizontal markets. The vertical markets include mining, Oil & Gas customers, defence, security, NGOs, government security, media and other corporates.” Horizontal markets are primarily defined as business, disaster management, humanitarian activities, government at national and local level and the broad NGO sector.

It’s a difficult market to define, and equally difficult to plan for, he points out. Many of the above markets are seasonal or depend on the annual budgets. Mining fluctuates with global commodities pricing, while

disaster management depends on nature “In the satellite business you always have to be ready for the unexpected. But though you can’t predict, you can develop your services to be on hand and available at the right time at the right price. ‘Be prepared’ is my watchword!” Though Blue Sky’s market is mainly sub-Saharan, there is increasing activity to the north. The resources boom across West Africa is attracting a lot of new players; platinum in Zimbabwe, copper and gold in DRC, major dams an infrastructure in the Great Lakes region; road building in Chad; the regeneration of Libya; oil discoveries in



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Uganda and South Sudan; offshore gas in Tanzania and Mozambique and the hoped for recovery of the Egyptian economy – all of these are catalysing new projects whose primary need is for reliable communications and Blue Sky can take that headache away quickly and economically, he asserts.

25 percent of Blue Sky's revenue comes from mining and oil and gas exploration customers. When entering unexplored regions in Africa, satellite communications are the first forms of communication on site. A new mining operation may start out with a very small geology team to assess the potential of



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Around the world, nowhere is the immediate need for broadband more crucial than in Africa, and in particular, Central Africa, where terrestrial networks are least capable of achieving sufficient connectivity. Africa cannot afford to wait; people need to be connected wherever they are, now. Eutelsat, one of the world's leading satellite operators, has introduced IP Easy, a simple and affordable two-way broadband access solution for SOHOs and SMEs. IP Easy helps companies and consumers in Africa to hook up with the rest of the world. Fully independent from terrestrial connections, this new platform is routed via Ku-band capacity on the EUTELSAT 16A satellite at 16° East for customers from Senegal to Madagascar. The service is now available in Southern Africa, via the EUTELSAT 10A satellite at 10° East. Bluesky/Gigasat is our first partner to begin deployment in this region. With a one meter dish and a PC-connected modem, SME/SOHOs and

residential customers can immediately connect to the internet irrespective of location. Quality of service is guaranteed and provides identical support for business-critical applications requiring a highly reliable infrastructure, to deliver a transparent and high speed broadband connection. The cost of the end-user terminal is below today's most competitive satellite systems available on the market. Additionally, the installation of the antenna is so simple that it can be performed without the need for specialised installers, and the terminal requires no configuration at all, further reducing the initial investment for each new site.

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a newly acquired licence. All they would need at that stage is a satellite phone, which they can rent. From there the needs escalate when they are followed by surveyors, a small drill rig onsite for a couple of weeks, then a camp will be set up for which a small onsite Inmarsat transceiver might be the best solution, allowing communication between the team and back to base at speeds up to 560 Kbps. Later, when the project goes into construction and production phase it will probably need a full blown C-band system with its own dedicated bandwidth. At this point a multiple VSAT connectivity installation is provided, with separate networks for management and construction, staff entertainment and

family communication, and mine operations. Blue Sky can provide every stage of this progression. This way the mines can send daily updates on production and geological surveys, consumables and sourcing reports to their head offices, giving them constant real time access to their field operations.

As with cell communications, satellite

costs have dropped dramatically over the last decade. "Hardware costs are typically a fifth of what they were when we started, and today C-band capacity is as cheap as fibre capacity, and of course it is far quicker to set up, which is really important to most of our customers." By 2020, he adds, the continent will be so well covered by satellite that there will be

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no reason for any business or individual not to have internet access or to be online with a smartphone or some other kind of device. When you consider that Blue Sky’s satellite service costs around €39 a month for one GB capacity with download speeds of 4 Mbps and an upload speed of 1 Mbps the cost of a truly reliable satellite connection is comparable with European prices. At the beginning of 2013 Blue Sky was the first company to

offer satellite internet services on a prepaid bandwidth basis to mining companies across Africa. Prepaid bandwidth will help budget conscious new mining companies to monitor costs. With no fixed monthly costs, they can now monitor their bottom line and ensure that exploration starts within budget.

Pedro Camacho loves competition, as he observes European providers turn their attention from their static home market and

waking up to the massive potential of Africa. “It just goes to confirm that there is a lot of business out there, and these new entrants keep us focused on wanting to achieve more, do more and do things better.” Naturally, having taken pains and spent money to build up a unique portfolio of licences across the continent, developing unequalled local knowledge along the way, he is a bit cynical about what he sees as European opportunists coming in hoping to cream off the business. He describes this attitude as European recolonisation.

But any organisation looking to set up operations in Africa would be best advised to come to Blue Sky, an African company that has grown with its market and is constantly planning for the next technological leap

forward. “We are planning six years ahead,” he says. With many new satellites being launched annually, the second decade of this century and a new generation of multi-beam mobile satellites being launched in the L-band and 2 GHz band promises to greatly improve the quality and throughput capability of mobile satellite services. The only certainty is that what is already an essential service for remote operators will replace earth-based networks.

“We look forward to rounding off our own second decade!” enthuses Camacho. **BE**

For more information about Blue Sky visit: www.blueskysat.com

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