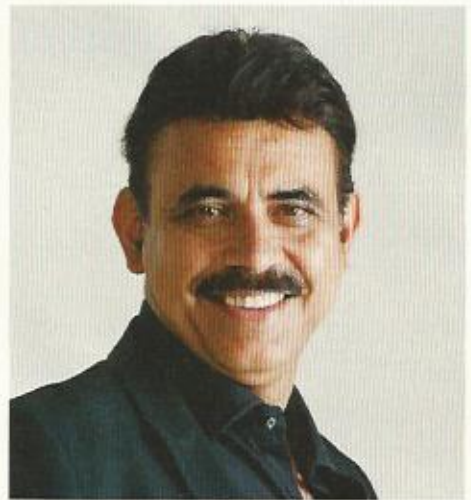


MOBILE AFOOT

Parvez Ahmed, managing director, Almasa IT Distribution talks about the company's recently launched Almasa Mobility.



CHANNEL: What's the main motivation behind Almasa Mobility division and where is the company hoping to take this business in the Middle East region?

Parvez Ahmed: The motivation is very obvious as the channel is merging and being consumers ourselves, we have seen the uptake of smartphones and tablets grow rapidly over the past 12 months. I do believe we are late but it's better to be late than never. The merging of traditional IT channel and independent mobile devices retailers has given an opportunity for both set of partners to cross sell mobile solutions with traditional IT products. So what we have done since October 2012, when we opened the mobile business unit is to acquire distribution rights from Asus. This coincided with Asus' tablet launch and later this year, we will add the vendor's smartphone portfolio to the tablet range. This has gelled well for us as we represent the vendor in the traditional IT business. We now have a full-fledged mobile unit with a support team to develop this segment further.

CHANNEL: What is your official flagship brand in the Almasa Mobility?

Parvez Ahmed: Right now, the sales team has been given targets for Asus' mobility offerings, targets for normal trading and we have also partnered with other mobile solutions vendors namely BlackBerry, Huawei and LG as a tier-two partner. As for Apple, everyone knows that's a commodity so when ever we get a chance we buy but as a player in the supply chain, we have been recognised by the three vendors as a second-tier partner.

CHANNEL: How are you developing the mobile channel market in the region?

Parvez Ahmed: Unlike IT where there is one traditional dealer channel, with mobile, the channel is split into two. One comprises the wholesalers or re-exporters and then you have power retailers just like in IT. IT also has wholesalers but in the mobility sector, you have a segment they call independent retailers (IRs) and this a big market especially in other Emirates like Ras Al Khaimah, Fujairah, Ajman, Umm Al Quwain, Sharjah and Abu Dhabi. In IT, these markets never made much significant growth as customers used to come to Dubai to buy whatever IT products they needed. With mobile, we see there is an opportunity for Almasa and we have invested in three vans and everyday the three sales executives travelling to these markets selling our offerings to IRs.

CHANNEL: Are you planning on rolling out this concept to other countries in the Middle East region?

Parvez Ahmed: For now, this initiative is focusing on the UAE market. However, where we have in-country presence, like in Kuwait and Iraq through Almasa IT Distribution, we will be able to replicate the model if it makes business sense. It will also depend on when Asus brings out the smartphone array. Our plan is to build the Mobility division around a few solid brands and right now Asus is the flagship brand in this division. We believe this will be a fitting proposition for the two countries if we go ahead with the implementation.

CHANNEL: You earlier on alluded to the merging of the traditional IT channel and with telecoms. Is Almasa Mobility planning to work with service providers?

Parvez Ahmed: Service providers are a huge

opportunity but that's another vertical which is 100% driven like the power retail, by the vendors. That said, if our flagship brand Asus signs with any service provider in the region we would be part of such an arrangement.

CHANNEL: What channel programmes are you planning to roll out to develop the mobile channel?

Parvez Ahmed: As we are at a nascent stage and the volumes are still growing, we haven't reached a level where we can lock them into a target like is the case with most IT brands. Right now what we are working hard on is to raise awareness, marketing initiatives as this segment was neglected in the past. Another thing is that we cannot introduce a dedicated partner programme on products where Almasa Mobility is not the official distributor and at the moment Asus hasn't introduced its smartphone offerings. The tablet range has been well received in the market and optimistic that when the vendor unveils smartphones, the market will respond positively.

CHANNEL: What does the future hold for Almasa Mobility?

Parvez Ahmed: The first stage in our mobility business development was to make our presence felt in this market and we have managed to set things in motion. So far the feedback from vendors has been positive as we are also interested in becoming a tier-one distribution partner for majority of the vendor's whose products we already represent on the IT side of business. We are delighted to see Intel, a partner of ours working with Asus on tablets and this is going to be even better when they collaborate on the smartphones as well. ■