

Making communication count



ANIL KUMAR SARDANA

Tata Teleservices managing director **Anil Sardana** explains how the company is touching — and changing — lives through its use of technology, in an interview with *Shubha Madhukar*.

How do you view the role that communication technology plays in business and in our personal lives?

Basic communication is like blood in the body and technology is the backbone. There has been a paradigm shift from what communication technology used to be and what it is now. Today the stakeholders of a corporate entity are so far distributed geographically that without the enabling tool of communication they would not be able to operate. It is because of communication technology that enterprises can reach far, use information and take well-informed decisions.

At a personal level, communication technology has become part and parcel of everyday life, so much so that people take it for granted. There are aspirations that get created as telecommunication companies and the ecosystem they function in mature and develop.

How is Tata Teleservices (TTSL) using communication technology to impact lives?

TTSL touches the lives of millions

of people. Overall, it fills in the communication blanks between people. It facilitates the communication needs of people aspiring to stay connected, be it an individual or an enterprise.

As for social context, TTSL began looking at communication technology through this prism after the devastating Indian Ocean tsunami in December 2004. That event demonstrated that, while it is impossible for fishermen at sea to know well in advance that a catastrophe is on its way, it is possible to use technology to issue warnings. And it is possible to use technology to help them facilitate their livelihoods.

Today fishermen who have subscribed to our services and carry a phone to sea receive updates on the weather and information about national water boundaries, the exact location of schools of fish, and ports where they can get the best price for their catch. Our fishermen face huge problems when they unknowingly cross into Sri Lankan or Pakistani waters. Also, they often return with a meagre catch despite spending more time out at sea. TTSL is using technology to help them in these and other areas. For various reasons we did not commercialise our service for fishermen, but we see scale in this and, therefore, our 'Fisher Friend' product is now being converted into a commercial

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TTSL touches lives that would normally remain untouched by technology

offering. I am giving this example because in the urban situation it has become so common that you are unable to fathom what the technology is actually doing.

There are other innovative projects as well where TTSL is using technology to benefit people who may otherwise remain untouched by it. How does the company arrive at these ideas?

Mostly it's an outcome of brainstorming, research and innovation at work. For instance, till the time the tsunami happened we actually had no clue about the kind of problems an incident such as this could bring. We could have ignored it, but the way we work in the Tata group is to look at the event and work at how to mitigate the impact, should it happen again. Talking to stakeholders also helps in designing services that work to their advantage.

There is a general perception that technology is for the savvy. What are the challenges in making rural people understand your products and services?

Not all rural folk may be well educated, but they are smart enough to familiarise themselves with gadgets once they have been made to understand it. Like all of us, they too have aspirations and they quickly get to know which buttons to press at what time to get the information they want. We see them using our services with ease. Typically a fisherman at sea will check his mobile phone every 15 minutes for weather updates.

Besides fishermen, we are also help-

ing farmers with technology. The farmer community in India is quite diverse and we have a product for each of the different socio-economic segments of farmers.

What about the various collaborations you have?

We are working with Tata Consultancy Services on the mKrishi project, which is about providing serv-

ices and solutions to farmers on their mobile phones. We have worked with various non-governmental organisations to make sure that the backend arrangement for all that the farmer needs to know is available at the press of a button. TCS and TTSL are also working together, along with the Sir Ratan Tata Trust, to help potato growers in Punjab. ●

Technology lends a hand

Learning: A joint initiative of Qualcomm, the Nasscom Foundation and TTSL to provide quality education, awareness and greater exposure to technology in rural clusters across India. The project helps 33,000 students and adults every year.

Farm2Fork: TTSL and the Multi Commodity Exchange of India (MCX) have entered into a strategic alliance to disseminate information on spot and future process of commodities, and to provide technology-based information services to farmers and other participants in the rural ecosystem. The TTSL-MCX alliance increases access to market information for farmers, reduces intermediaries, and improves price realisation for farmers.

Fishing: In collaboration with Qualcomm, a special application has been created to provide fishermen information on the exact location of schools of fish, weather updates (with details on wave heights, wind velocities and impending storms), and also the port to head for to get the best price for their catch. Along with Qualcomm and the MS Swaminathan Research Foundation, TTSL is taking this service commercial at a nominal cost. The plan is to reach as many as possible of the 46 million fishermen along the 8,100km-long Indian coastline.

Mandi bhav: In collaboration with Impetus Technologies, TTSL provides farmers and commodity traders spot prices from over 3,000 markets across India on their Tata Indicom phones. The service will enable them to make informed and prudent buy-sell decisions. Farmers can look forward to real-time information on 500 commodities in nine languages. The service has been launched in Punjab and will be rolled out in other states shortly.