

Answering the call

FastTelco is driven by customer needs and the desire to differentiate itself in a highly competitive market. In a bid to achieve both, the company has put in place WiMAX services, implemented Fortinet's security solution and established a new datacentre.

"When people think of telecom or service providers in Kuwait, the first name that should pop into their heads is FastTelco. For us to achieve that we have to go the extra mile in providing extensive customer support and service, something that is not known in the region," says Omar Kaaki, general manager of FastTelco.

Being the best is the driving passion of this company, which is one of the major telecom operators in Kuwait. This has become of increasing importance for the company as growth continues to escalate.

"We have grown quite a bit over the last few years. The last year, the average growth rate has been 25% across consumer and corporate segments. This is significant taking into consideration the competition in the Kuwait market. We have very fierce competition with four service providers of data communications that offer internet access or similar kind of services, and we also have two mobile operators that also offer data communication services for the retail and consumer side. We have seen growth only because of the distinctive services that we offer," states Kaaki.

Differentiated service provision is key to FastTelco's operations and the company strives to achieve this constantly with bundled packages and increased options for their customers – business and consumer alike.

"According to the last study we did, we have around 45% to 50% of the market share in the consumer broadband sector and a similar number for the corporate business. We need to

still increase that. Our objective is that when anyone thinks of data communications, business grade telephony and managed services, FastTelco should be the first choice," asserts Kaaki.

Information technology has been a strong pillar of support to the company as it reaches higher on its growth path.

"We started around eight years ago and we have been running on an optical network that runs throughout Kuwait. We own around 60% of the fibre underground. Last year we invested over US\$2 million in a new network infrastructure and basically that includes everything from the transport layer through the MPLS layer all the way up to the access layer in terms of DSL ports. We have also

further expanded our telephony services to include a new, redundant Class 5 switch from Ericsson," says Kaaki.

FastTelco prides itself on having been one of the first in the Middle East to have invested in an MPLS network as far back as 2002. The company now offers layer 2 and layer 3 MPLS services across Kuwait.

Moving forward

Apart from investing in the base infrastructure early, the group continues to conduct regular quarterly reviews to keep abreast

of requirements related to both internet and other services.

Recently realising the need to expand coverage in Kuwait, especially to areas where laying down a physical infrastructure might not be feasible, the company implemented an entire WiMAX solution.

"The WiMAX licence has made the most significant difference, in terms of last mile access, over the past year. It is easily one of the biggest implementations we have done in the recent past and one with a significant business

"Some of our customers needed some additional reliability and we have connected them to two different base stations. That adds a tremendous amount of value in terms of increased availability to these customers," explains Kaaki.

The WiMAX solution has already paid back on the initial cost and has covered the investment capital, not just in terms of service provision but also in terms of overall popularity.

On the business service side, the company introduced

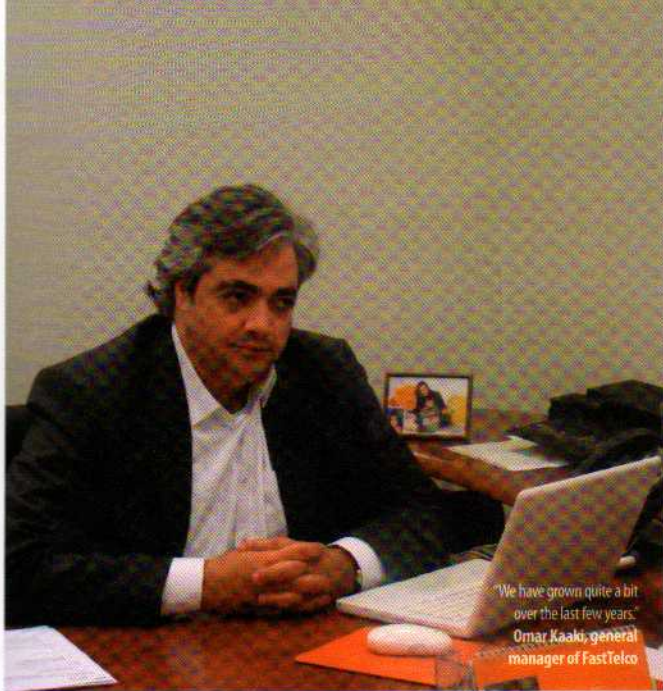
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impact. We have set up the network to extend reachability across areas in Kuwait and we can state now that we offer connectivity from border-to-border," states Kaaki.

The WiMAX network, which was put in place by Aperto, has now been operational for around nine months but it took about a year to implement and too set up. According to Kaaki, the company already has customers using the WiMAX network for their complete IP VPN connectivity, internet provision and voice-related services.

managed security services for enterprises last year.

"The customer only has to subscribe to the service and does not need to invest in any hardware. The customer traffic is routed into our security devices and is filtered back to the customer based on pre-specified criteria. We have antivirus and anti-spam filtering, intrusion prevention and detection as well as web content filtering, and we can do this whether it is hosted mail services or the customer is using his own dedicated mail service," says Kaaki.



Infrastructure at FastTelco

• Core switches	Cisco
• Edge switches	Cisco
• Routers	Cisco
• Firewalls	Cisco
• Voice systems	Cisco/Ericsson
• Servers	Sun, HP, IBM, Supermicro
• WAN optimisation	NA
• Network operating systems	NA
• Remote access	Cisco/Alcatel
• Network management systems	Cisco/Alcatel
• Storage	Sun

The company needed some brand-new investments to provide the security services to its customers, and key among them was a hardware platform that could provide the necessary security elements and also be capable of accommodating numerous clients.

"We needed a multi-tenant, centralised solution that would basically take care of everything. We found the perfect solution from Fortinet. We use their hardware platform now to deliver our services to clients," says Kaaki.

The company implemented Fortinet's FortiGate 3600A multi-threat security platform. The appliance is set up with virtual domains in order to isolate security services provided to each end-user, or even separates the management of these services, from the one hardware platform.

"The advantage of that provision cannot be over-rated. If we were to implement a normal security service using conventional methods, it means that I would have to dedicate a hardware or software platform for every single subscriber. The only company that we have seen capable of providing such services or supervising such platforms is Fortinet. We carried out our evaluation and we then tested the platform thoroughly for three months before deciding to go ahead with it. The implementation was completed in June last year," states Kaaki.

The company also invested in a redundant, failover hardware device and, according to Kaaki,

FastTelco will look to expand this setup as it continues to grow.

Apart from the pure security platform, the company also had a relook at its datacentre provisions to provide better service provision to customers.

"We had one datacentre originally, which we upgrade regularly. Last year, we set up a new datacentre away from the current one for customers who require redundancy or disaster recovery-based services. A lot of customers have their entire IT infrastructure housed in our primary datacentre, and they would not have had any other choice but to set

up a disaster recovery provision in their own offices. Our second datacentre, which has been setup around 15kms from our primary one with the same level of redundancy and security, creates an option for our clients in disaster recovery," says Kaaki.

These datacentres have been equipped with the latest connectivity technology and ensure maximum data security. They remain redundant in power, cooling and even security. According to Kaaki, around 80% to 85% of the datacentres are already fully occupied and the company will look to expand the centres and their capabilities in the next year.

"Major customers of datacentres include financial institutions and a lot of the corporate online services. We also have value added services for mobile operators that use our datacentre to deliver their services," says Kaaki.

Looking forward

IT is not a one-time investment for FastTelco but a continuing process of upgrades, tweaking

On the infrastructure side, over the last six years, constant upgrades have been taking place including broadband extension, addition of slots, even extending the layer 2 configuration to interested customers.

The entire IT team, across internal and customer service provision, number around 240, according to Kaaki.

"The major project for next year would be a customer

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and a constant cycle of maintenance that ensures FastTelco is capable of providing new services to consumer and business customers.

"IT budgets are done on an annual basis and it depends on what kind of expansion we are planning for the year ahead and what projects are expected to support that expansion. The projects are reviewed and recommendations are provided on resource availability. Then we decide on what new investments in software, hardware and professional services are required for these projects. This process remains the same for every project," says Kaaki.

relationship management (CRM) implementation. This would lead to better customer service and at the end of the day that is our objective," says Kaaki.

And this is by no means the end of the road, since Kaaki believes that they are still dealing with only the tip of the iceberg.

"We are yet to see a huge expansion within the service and data provision business in Kuwait and the region. This will grow very rapidly in the next three years, especially when penetration levels in Kuwait increase from the current low base. And when that happens, FastTelco will be there to lead the way," concludes Kaaki.