

T.O. Hydro plugs into data

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On Toronto Hydro Telecom Inc.'s (THT) promotional material a large-print word catches the eye: "unexpected." According to the firm's executives, it describes the surprise that some people express when they hear that a power company offers communication services.

But judging by the words of industry observers, THT won't be an unexpected service provider for long.

"They're doing it right," said Lawrence Surtees, telecom analyst at IDC Canada Ltd., after a tour of THT's operations centre in Toronto's west end.

"Right" means taking a go-slow approach to growth. "Everything we do is based on an order from a customer," said Ewan Crawford, THT's director, telecom.

It also means maintaining realistic expectations. THT isn't aiming to roust Bell Canada from the top spot. "We don't have an ego," said Ian Miles, the firm's vice-president. "We're quite happy to be a backup supplier."

And right suggests that THT provides the appropriate products at the proper time. Miles talked up the company's dark fibre, private line, Ethernet and Internet access services as a disaster recovery platform, which could come in handy should a power outage affect parts of Ontario, Quebec and many a United State, for instance.

Given all of the above, THT hopes to transition from alternative provider to serious contender for the enterprise's business.

The company's fibre-optic network spans 450 kilometres and interconnects with other utility telco plants, such as Enersource Telecom's Mississauga, Ont. cables, and Hydro One Telecom Inc.'s province-wide infrastructure.

THT's network is a SONET-Ethernet hybrid underpinning, which affords old-fashioned private line connections as well as less traditional links.

It spells flexibility. For example, Crawford said one customer requested a long-haul Fibre Channel connection, sans the high price of DWDM. He said THT managed just the thing, relying on a mix of Lucent Technologies Inc. SONET nodes and an Akara Corp. multiplexer.

THT's representatives said the company isn't about to step into the tumultuous local voice service market. It's too risky. And don't expect to see THT experimenting with bleeding edge technology, such as data that travels over power lines.

Miles said THT's defining attribute is constant monitoring. The firm's NOC operates 24x7. "We don't rely on pagers to wake us up in the middle of the night."

Nine network specialists man the operations centre in shifts. THT's reps said clients can rest assured that at least one of those professionals would play a part in any implementation. As well, THT has no customer contact centre. When clients call, they talk to the NOC.

In an industry where meantime to repair usually has businesses waiting four hours for fixes, THT averaged repairs in two hours last year. And whereas it takes "a month to forever," according to Surtees, to get service from other telcos, THT boasts a relatively short 21-day waiting period.

One client said the carrier is living up to its promises. IT outsourcing firm Quartet Services Inc. has data centres connected via THT's fibre.

"Capability was a huge part of it," said Rob Bracey, Quartet's spokesperson. "The fact that I can dial up 10 megs to 100 megs without batting an eyelash, that I can link my seven facilities with more than just pinging capability, that's very important."

Bracey said THT wasn't an unexpected service provider. He pointed out that the company's relationship with Toronto Hydro - the utility owns THT - meant the telco had access to rights-of-way, and direct connections to many of Toronto's buildings.

Miles said THT got its start in 1994. Toronto Hydro already had a substantial fibre-optic plant to connect power stations. As the local voice service boom was beginning, it seemed smart to offer wholesale access to the new carriers.

But boom turned to bust. Many of the newcomers are defunct. THT's current focus on the enterprise is of necessity, Miles said.

Surtees said power companies around the world are getting in on the telecom act. Indeed, in Canada THT joins a growing list that includes Enmax Envision Inc. in Calgary, created by Enmax Energy Corp., and FibreWired Hamilton, an offshoot of Hamilton, Ont.'s main utility.

He said the rise of these utility telcos spells increased choice for enterprises seeking communication services. "There's another set of players."

Still, Miles figures it could be a while before THT will be able to change the large print on the promotional material from "unexpected" to something more optimistic. "It's going to be years yet before we get the recognition I'd be happy with."