

dtac chief vows to fight for customers

NEW CEO SAYS THEY ARE THE PRIORITY AS OPERATOR SEEKS FRIENDLIER NBTC STANCE IN COUNTDOWN TO CONCESSION EXPIRY



New dtac CEO Alexandra Reich says her main goal is for the operator "to start winning in the market again".

SIRIVISH TOOMGUM THE NATION

ALEXANDRA Reich, the newly appointed chief executive officer of Total Access Communication (dtac), has vowed to fight hard to protect its customers from possible service difficulties during a transition period relating to the expiry of an operating concession.

Reich took the helm of the mobile telecommunications operator on August 20, replacing Lars Norling.

She said yesterday that as the dtac concession on its use of spectra for services will expire on September 15, this is a very special time for the company and its customers, and dtac would remain focused on them.

"And I can tell you we are going to fight very hard to make sure our customers are affected by this [transition period] as little as possible," Reich said. "My intention is, first, to secure a protection plan for them. Second, we

are going to be honest and transparent to them, respectfully and fairly.

"And finally, we are need to better understand their needs and deliver what really matters to them. These are my priorities as the new CEO of dtac."

dtac has recently asked the National Broadcasting and Telecommunications Commission (NBTC) to consider granting a remedy period to the company's 1800MHz and 850MHz customers. DTAC currently uses 25MHz of the 1800MHz spectrum to provide services under a concession from CAT Telecom.

As dtac subsidiary DTAC TriNet (DTN) and Advanced Info Service subsidiary Advanced Wireless Network each won the right to use 5MHz of this same band on August 19, dtac has asked the regulator to grant the remedy period to cover the remaining 15MHz for it after the CAT concession ends.

The remedy period refers to the duration the NBTC would allow telecom operators to continue using existing spectra to offer services on an interim basis after their concession ends. This is to give them time to migrate all customers to other networks.

CAT has granted this 2x25MHz of 1800MHz and also 2x10MHz of 850MHz to DTAC. The NBTC reclaimed these bands and put 1800MHz in the auction on August 19.

Earlier, NBTC secretary general Takorn Tantasith said that the case relating to the 1800 MHz spectrum should be determined before September 15.

The NBTC has declined to grant the remedy period to dtac's 850MHz customers, citing that dtac declined to bid for a 900MHz licence. The NBTC has also recently reclaimed the 850MHz from dtac, and rebanded it as the 900MHz for auction. No com-

pany had submitted an application to bid for it, prompting the auction to be aborted.

Reich said there are 430,000 dtac customers who still need to migrate from the dtac concession to DTN.

“The people who have not migrated are often the people who are the most vulnerable. Seventy per cent of them are elderly; many are in remote areas, or have very old devices that they haven’t upgraded. They are the ones who most need connectivity. We should be worried about them staying connected.

“We’ve done our utmost to reach out to them. We’ve sent them SMS. We ran numerous campaigns. But we still need more time to make sure these people don’t end up disconnected. But we need time. It’s time we’re asking for.”

Reich said the predicament of these customers illustrated the need for consideration, adding that provisions for subscriber protection are in the NBTC’s regulations.

“The NBTC’s Measure for Temporary Subscriber Protection is designed to ensure that they have the appropriate time to migrate. It doesn’t take days. It takes months,” she said.

“Some people have said that dtac should have bought more spectrum in the latest auctions. But the 900 MHz spectrum that was put up for auction this month is not the spectrum we’re operating on. We’re on 850 MHz. Every single site on 850 MHz would need an equipment change to operate on 900 MHz. It’s a very intense work that takes three years. Even bidding on 900 MHz would lead to the same situation we are in now.”

She said that it is a joint responsibility between the NBTC and dtac and other related parties to protect consumers. In the past, the NBTC had

also granted subscriber protection for periods between nine months and more than two years to other telcos during transition periods.

“It’s our firm belief dtac customers deserve to be treated the same way. Currently, we’re awaiting the NBTC’s decision on this and if the NBTC does not grant us protection, we will explore how to best ensure dtac customers are treated fairly,” Reich added.

When asked if it is enough for dtac to survive the competition when it will have only 2x5MHz bandwidth of the 1800MHz in hand from the recent auction, an existing 2x15MHz bandwidth of 2.1GHz, and 60MHz of 2.3GHz under TOT’s current partnership, she said that the bandwidth capacity that matters most is on downloads, due to consumers’ changing mobile usage.

“In Thailand, dtac will have the most download capacity in hand soon. As a result, I’m confident we’ll have the best data network in many key service areas by 2019. The issue for dtac is therefore not bandwidth. The issue is the transition from concession to licence - and ensuring that we’re not leaving vulnerable customers behind in the process,” Reich said.

“dtac is also taking steps to ensure great coverage for customers no matter what. It is densifying the 2300 MHz and 2100 MHz networks. It is also working with NBTC to make sure that low-band spectrum is made available to mobile providers at reasonable prices and conditions.

“Ultimately, my goal is for us to start winning in the market again. And growing. But it all starts with securing a protection plan for our customers.”