

Interview with John Branscum, President, Comtech EF Data



John Branscum, President of Comtech EF Data, the recognized global leader in satellite bandwidth efficiency and link optimization. Comtech EF Data's advanced communication solutions encompass the Advanced VSAT Solutions, Modems, WAN Optimization, Managed Bandwidth and RF products. The Company is recognized as a technology innovator, and has a reputation for exceptional product quality and reliability. John Branscum is also President of Comtech Xicom Technology and SVP of Comtech Telecommunications. He has 25+ years in the High Power Microwave Amplifier industry, previously holding positions at Communications and Power Industries, Litton Industries and Varian Associates.

Question

What are your thoughts on the satellite communications industry of today and where do you see most of the growth in our industry moving forward?

It's an exciting time for the satellite industry and we are very bullish on its potential. The pace of spacecraft and ground equipment innovation has increased dramatically. Satellite service providers are demanding entirely new price-for-performance levels to remain competitive with terrestrial options to be able to penetrate new markets. This requires everyone in the value chain, from those that manufacture and operate the satellites to those that provide the ground portion of the overall solution, to push the envelope of what is possible and offer products to the satellite service provider that allow them to succeed for the long term.

We believe the majority of industry growth will lie in the areas of mobility, backhaul, government and commercial fixed networks with higher throughput applications leading the charge. Higher throughput offerings drive profitability for the service provider and therefore are an attractive target, driving the market as a whole. This focus has forced ground equipment manufacturers to offer more powerful, efficient and intelligent solutions to the market.





Global Service Providers (Source: iStock)

Question

How has Comtech EF Data approached this innovation?

We have spent a great deal of time sitting and listening to our customers to understand their challenges and have worked to provide innovative solutions that solve their business problems. As the service provider's cost basis is tied to MHz while revenues are tied to Mbps, efficiency is key to allow for a competitive (and profitable) pricing structure versus alternatives.

Efficiency comes in many levels, from pure spectral efficiency to intelligent bandwidth sharing to powerful compression techniques. Just as important as efficiency is the ability to offer graceful and dynamic high-throughput duplex connections teamed with robust traffic handling abilities to ensure that applications are able to function optimally. I believe the phrase "purposeful innovation" would summarize our approach to the market.

Question

Can you dive a bit more into how the mobility market has driven growth?

Mobility has been an excellent growth engine for the satellite communications industry over the past decade as users on moving vehicles are expecting to receive a similar experience to that which they experience while at home. Entire spacecrafts have been uniquely designed to meet the demands of this market while ground antenna innovations have created small footprint solutions to render moving vehicle connectivity not only viable but also quite cost competitive.

In the maritime market cruise ship operators in particular have seen a significant increase in requirements and are pushing the industry to innovate and enable economical connectivity at dramatically higher throughputs. They are looking to maximize the passenger Quality of Experience (QoE), getting them to at-home levels, which has forced ground equipment providers to develop two-way, high-speed connectivity solutions that follow the user wherever they may go.



Question

You mention innovation on two levels above, one focused on space (the spacecraft) and one regarding the ground equipment. Do these need to happen at the same time or should one lead the other?

It's important that these innovations happen in parallel to ensure that product roadmaps and the plans of the ground solutions provider (such as Comtech) are aligned with that of the satellite operator. We all know that Satellite Operators are moving to High Throughput Satellites (HTS) to drive innovation, and especially to drive their costs down. That said, no two HTS solutions are alike so it's imperative that ground equipment providers like Comtech spend as much time as possible sharing ideas and collaborating with the different satellite operators, each of which may be targeting different vertical markets.

We have placed a great deal of effort and focus on working with both global and regional satellite operators to ensure we are providing purpose-built solutions today that allow the service provider to optimize its satellite and ground solutions choices for profitable and sustainable services beyond 2020.

Question

What are your thoughts on the different orbital options available in the market today, namely GEO, MEO and LEO?

The industry has seen innovation across all orbits, which had produced new price points and new business opportunities for the service provider. We believe that while each type of orbit has its own advantages and disadvantages, including different latency and throughput capabilities, it comes down to the market and, more importantly, the applications to be supported, as to which solution makes sense for the service provider.



Question

Most market analysts predict huge revenue growth for satellite service providers that are able to interconnect the Internet of Things (IoT). Do you agree?

Absolutely. “Big Data” is getting bigger and end users are requiring a digital nervous system to allow real-time decision making to be available and for this entire process to be automated. As sensors become smaller and economical so that they can be placed in remote locations, the challenge of getting to that golden data becomes more difficult. Narrowband solutions have been readily available for low data rates for some time now but as the sheer mass of data to be transmitted from increasingly remote locations continues to increase, broadband solutions of an aggregation of sensors and devices will become more prevalent.

Question

Which verticals do you believe will see the most growth from IoT?

We see growth across all of our verticals, including mobility, backhaul, government and commercial fixed networks. But again, the higher throughput applications will lead the charge and it's imperative that service providers that are targeting IoT choose ground equipment solutions that offer the headroom needed to scale as remote to central site throughput demands continue to accelerate.

Question

Any final thoughts you'd like to share?

We feel the satellite industry is at a tipping point in 2018 and are optimistic on its potential. The main opportunities lie with those that have positioned themselves to offer a future-proof differentiated service that can quickly and gracefully scale as end user demands increase. We look forward to working with those service providers that are looking to deliver on these opportunities. 🚀