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Unwired gets wild with Woolies

By Fleur Doidge, CRN | 28 October 2004 00:00 AEST | General News

ISP Unwired has added Woolworths and Co-op Bookshops to its stable of resellers for its wireless broadband service, claiming its supply problems have been ironed out and coverage is improving.

David Spence, CEO at Unwired, said Dick Smith Electronics, Tandy, PowerHouse and university-based Co-op Bookshops would start selling Unwired product in a total 76 stores from 31 October. Woolworths would contribute 64 and Co-op a further 12 outlets.

"They have very strong brands in the marketplace, and we want to support them as well as we support Harvey Norman," he said.

Unwired already had product in Harvey Norman, and selling wholesale via the likes of People Telecom and Internode. The ISP was continuing to fine-tune its service delivery by adjusting network infrastructure, Spence said.

Early inventory problems were solved, and the company's TV advertising, featuring champion ocean surfer Layne Beachley, was slated to kick back in this Sunday, he said.

"We've got plenty of stocks now," he said. "We've built up a significant buffer in case demand exceeds what we have and I'm pretty confident there's enough stock right now today and over the next six weeks."

Alex Cochran, communications merchandise manager for Dick Smith Electronics, said Unwired's service was expected to sell well.

"We believe the simplicity of Unwired's broadband service will be a compelling proposition with many of our customers already expressing interest. We are confident demand will be high," Cochran said.

Unwired's \$33 million network covered nearly 2000 square kilometres by the time of its August launch, using 68 base stations to provide portable broadband access to a claimed 95 percent of Sydney – a 1.2 million Sydney households and 240,000 small businesses.

"We've got another three towers to be in before Christmas to fill some of the spots where we have less coverage and we have two teams out there testing coverage suburb by suburb," Spence said.

A trial of VoIP on Unwired's service had been delayed one or two months but was still on track for its commercial launch in April as originally planned, he said.

PBA, a wireless company seen by some pundits as Unwired's main rival, has already begun expanding outside Sydney, into Brisbane and Melbourne. However, Unwired wasn't feeling the heat, Spence said.

"It's pretty small coverage in those areas," he said. "We've got 100MHz of spectrum."

He added that Unwired was future-proofing itself in preparation for WiMAX, the Intel-sponsored technology expected to succeed current 802.11g and b wireless networking.

"We'll have a brand that covers a huge part of Australia," Spence said.

Unwired has said it plans to go on expanding its network to cater for increasing user numbers – with a total 71 or 72 towers expected eventually to cover Sydney.

About 50,000 to 70,000 customers mean break-even but from that point the ISP wanted to quickly start expanding across Australia. Retail take-up already looked promising, Spence told media at the company's August launch.

Spence said he could not release sale numbers until Unwired reported its financial results in January.

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