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Viya CEO Talks First Year on the Job, Changes for Growth, and 100 Percent Restoration

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Geraldine Pitt By. Viya

After two years, VIYA has emerged from a network reconstruction stage, reaching the full restoration of telecommunications services – internet, mobile phone and cable TV – destroyed during the 2017 hurricanes, company executives said.

“We have gotten to 100 percent,” said Geraldine Pitt, VIYA’s Chief Executive Officer. “If we have passed your home and you do not have connectivity, it is generally because you are not ready (to sign up) or you might be away. When you return to the territory, you come back in and get connected.”

The outlying communities of Coral Bay and Peter Bay on St. John and pockets on the West End of St. Thomas were the last brought back to the network of high-speed

internet, cable TV, entertainment and an assortment of other products and services.

In Coral Bay and Peter Bay, customers can now receive broadband internet service. “One of the important things about St. John is that we able to provide broadband and cable service, which we weren’t able to do before,” Ms. Matarangas-King said. “In some cases, we didn’t just restore, we went past what we were doing before and providing additional services.”

The Consortium sat down recently with Ms. Pitt to talk about her first year on the job as chief executive of the Virgin Islands’ leading telecommunications provider. Ms. Matarangas-King was also on-hand for the community update on VIYA’s progress from the devastation of sister storms Irma and Maria in September 2017.

Virtually all forms of communications – and particularly telecommunications – were severed and rendered unusable by the sister storms. The 2018 “Transforming Through Recovery” report by the Witt O’Brien’s crisis consulting firm, found 80 percent of cell tower sites on St. Croix and St. Thomas were knocked out. One hundred percent of cell towers on St. John were crippled.

Observers described the devastation suffered by the territory as akin to a war-zone. Except in a war-zone there *are* communications. VIYA helped reconnect Virgin Islanders to the outside world as fast and to the fullest extent it could.

“VIYA ... was relatively quick because the company had preplanned and staged personnel and equipment for faster post-storm assessments and initial restoration of its cellular and fiber systems,” the Witt O’Brien’s study found. But for the large part, aerial cable restorations could not be completed until much later, after the Water and Power Authority replaced damaged utility poles.

Ms. Pitt has plenty of experience guiding telecom companies during and after hurricanes, “but not two Category 5 storms ... like this,” she would remind you.

Consider:

She has worked in the Caribbean as the top regional executive for two international telecoms. Prior to VIYA, Ms. Pitt was CEO/Southern Cluster for Cable & Wireless Communications in St. Lucia, where she led strategy and planning for the company’s Lime brand in Grenada, St. Lucia, St. Vincent and Dominica. The resume goes on.

Rebuilding, Rebranding

VIYA, in its distant corporate history, was a telephone company with a straight-forward mission of running a telephone lines to homes and businesses from a network of telephone poles along the streets.

“In 2019, we’ve begun to shape the conversation about VIYA being more than a telephone company,” said Ms. Pitt. “We are now seeing bolder moves, in terms of mobile” telecommunications, she said. “We have redone our products and offerings, pricing, and a lot of our promotions.”

The company is currently promoting:

- Discounted WIFI & MIFI wireless internet
- Partial past-due debt forgiveness program
- Mobile phone plans with no-roaming calling to the U.S. and 13 other Caribbean islands from the British Virgin Islands south to Grenada.

The familial and professional ties Virgin Islanders have with friends and loved ones down-island drove some of the product choices, Ms. Pitt said. There are no roaming charges, for example, in the mainland U.S. for VIYA's latest "Home Abroad" offering. But importantly, Ms. Pitt said, there is now an option for adding phone, data and voice options for other Caribbean islands. See VIYA's website for details.

Reality, Radio and TV

Cable TV providers – like VIYA – have a common dilemma. The most popular entertainment networks are quite expensive to obtain, and VIYA has no control over those costs. "Cable is always a very competitive landscape simply because it is all of the content, which we don't any control over," Ms. Pitt said. "Getting the right content and the right price" is a challenge, she said.

Radio? That's a different story. As VIYA strategically moves into more cable selections, "... The VI still likes radio. It is still a good medium to get your message across, and you will find our team on radio practically five days a week," Ms. Pitt said.

The conversations are not paid infomercials, rather daily discussions of useful public information. "We use these appearances as an opportunity to talk about customer preparedness and basic things that people need to know," said Ms. Matarangas-King. "How can you protect yourself when talking about identity theft... We listen to our employees – a bit advantage, too. If 10 people in the business office ask the same question, we talk about that on the radio the next day."

Ms. Pitt said the questions are used as a cue to determine what to talk about on the air the next day. We use it coming from a community engagement point of view."

Day-to-day employees go on the radio shows, Ms. Matarangas-King said.

VIYA employees appears on the morning show on Da Vybe on Mondays: the Addie Ottley show on Tuesday mornings; Wednesday is the Big Fat Morning Show on Isle 95; Thursday's on the WSTX AM and 100 FM afternoon simulcast; and on Fridays on AM1620 and FM103.5 in the morning.

The Downside

A forward-looking to the next challenges and opportunities is crucial for corporate survival. And sometimes that comes with a little pain.

Ms. Pitt said 2019 "... was really a focus on reshaping the company: building our company and our revenue base. ... But also looking at our costs and ensuring that we have the right controls in place."

In other words, jobs may be lost. Ms. Pitt said there has been downsizing in the company in recent years, but was unclear how many jobs have been eliminated since the storms.

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