

BROADCASTING

From left, Thaicom CEO Suphajee Suthumpun, GMM Grammy chairman Paiboon Damrongchaitham and GMM Z CEO Thana Thienachariya flash the "Z" sign after their announcement to jointly launch high-definition satellite TV channels.

Thaicom, Grammy offer HD satellite channels

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Thaicom Plc is teaming with GMM Z to debut high-definition channels in the burgeoning satellite television market free from monthly charges.

Suphajee Suthumpun, Thaicom's chief executive, said the move is part of parent Intouch's strategy to jump into the red-hot digital TV fray with a planned licence.

It will also help Thaicom sell more bandwidth capacity on the Thaicom 6 satellite, as HD streams eat up bandwidth at the rate of around two gigabits per hour, or three times that of normal TV broadcasts, she added.

Thaicom, through its satellite dish subsidiary DTV Co, together with GMM Z launched five HD channels yesterday broadcasting on DTV dishes.

In a deal that runs until June, customers will be charged 4,990 baht for an HD set-top box, or 5,490 baht for a set-top box plus a DTV satellite dish. Customers can watch five HD channels including the Euro 2012 football championships, for which Grammy owns the broadcasting rights.

MCOT signed a three-year contract with Thaicom to rent satellite transponders for US\$3.5 million. MCOT then resells the transponders to GMM Z.

Ms Suphajee said offering HDTV is part of a shift from analogue to digital, which complies with the National Broadcasting and Telecommunications Commission's goal of a digital broadcasting system within five years.

"We expect to sell up to 500,000 HDTV boxes over two years, but ideally it will happen before the planned launch of Thaicom 6 in mid-June," she said.

Up to 10 million households watch satellite and cable TV via Thaicom's satellites, said Ms Suphajee.

Thana Thienachariya, GMM Z's chief executive, said Grammy plans to apply for a broadcasting licence to provide free TV services once the NBTC issues the licences.

He said satellite TV serves 8 million households, local cable TV reaches 4 million and pay-cable operated by True-Visions has 1.7 million subscribers. Conventional TV antennas number 5 million.

Thaicom also plans to launch two new commercial satellites — Thaicom 8

and Thaicom 9 — over a three-year period. Thaicom 8, also known as iPSTAR 2, will be launched by 2014 or 2015 when utilisation of the existing 40-gigabit iPSTAR satellite rises to 40-50% of total capacity, up from 25% currently.

Thaicom 9 will be positioned at 50.5 degrees east to reserve the country's orbital slot, due to expire in November. It will be a broadcast satellite and the company aims to expand its footprint in the Middle East, Europe and Africa.

She said the Thaicom 8 broadband satellite, to be positioned in the orbital slot at 119.5 degrees, will cost no more than US\$200 million. The satellite will serve the anticipated increase in broadband demand.

She said construction of the new satellites will begin once the company receives 30-50% of pre-orders for a new satellite and reaches its utilisation goal.

"We expect the utilisation of iPSTAR will reach 32% this year," she added.