

VIAVI AND Fibreplus INTERVIEW

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FIBREPLUS LTD, A LEADING UK DISTRIBUTOR, RECENTLY ANNOUNCED A NEW STRATEGIC ALLIANCE WITH VIAVI SOLUTIONS FOR DISTRIBUTION OF SELECT VIAVI INSTRUMENTS FOR FIBRE OPTIC TESTING. BROADBAND JOURNAL MET WITH FIBREPLUS ASSOCIATE DIRECTOR RHYS BRINE, MARKETING MANAGER BRIANNA GRANT AND VIAVI REGIONAL MARKETING MANAGER ROSS STODDART TO FIND OUT MORE.





DO YOU WANT TO TELL ME A LITTLE BIT ABOUT THE BACKGROUND TO THIS ANNOUNCEMENT AND HOW LONG YOU'VE BEEN WORKING ON THIS TOGETHER?

RHYS BRINE: We're a distributor operating across the UK and we've been working in this field since 2003. For the last few years we've been getting a lot of requests from our customers about different ways they could test their networks, ways they can save money or improve testing. We had a good few customers actually come to us and say, "Are you offering VIAVI?"

That's where we started our research. The extensive range of product portfolio that VIAVI offer, the pricing, the whole package was appealing. VIAVI's pricing is very well-placed and well-structured that for us as a third party, we felt we could give a customer everything they needed AND save them money. It also allowed us to continue to improve our offering to our customers. We're now the first service centre in the UK that offers the fibre range.

HOW MUCH WOULD THE STANDARD MEASURING OTDR TOOLS COST TO BUY?

RHYS BRINE: You could be looking at £3,000 - £30,000, though the average is in the £5,000 - £15,000 range.

IS THERE A SECONDHAND MARKET FOR THIS KIT?

RHYS BRINE: There is. There is a big secondhand market for those looking for low-cost testing alternatives, and unfortunately, a black market exists as well. Customers get caught out purchasing a tester they think is a good deal but sometimes it is too good to be true.

IS THERE ANY TRACKING DEVICE ON THEM OR SOMETHING LIKE THAT SO YOU CAN SEE WHAT'S HAPPENED TO IT?

BRIANNA GRANT: There are some procedures in place. VIAVI have a smart password. And you can lock the device in, but that doesn't stop the kit from getting stolen necessarily. What we do at least is we keep track on our side. We have a full list of all the kit that we've had and we've had it happen before where

another customer sends something in for service and we're like, "Hey, this was actually stolen about a year ago." We do try our best to track.

IF IT'S THAT EXPENSIVE TO BUY NEW, I'M SURPRISED SUCH KIT DOESN'T EMBED A TRACKING DEVICE OF SOME DESCRIPTION.

RHYS BRINE: Apple tags are available, but come with their own roadblocks for tracking when it comes to loaned and hired units. Not ideal. There needs to be a different solution.

RHYS, WHAT'S YOUR COMPANY'S ETHOS? HOW DO YOU WORK?

RHYS BRINE: I'm a very strong believer that people buy from people, so we make sure we look after our customers and treat them as friends and family. I try to say that without it sounding corny, but it's genuinely why we've built the business and structured it in the way that we have.

We started off as a training provider and people on our courses were asking us, "Well, I'm new into the industry, I've now got my qualification, where do I get my equipment from?"

FROM THE INDUSTRY

SO YOU SAW AN OPPORTUNITY.

RHYS BRINE: That's right. We expanded into equipment sales and now we have a fully-fledged service department, which is VIAVI approved, so we can calibrate and repair their OTDRs. We do Fibreplus calibrations and internal verifications for other desk test equipment manufacturers. We have the hire fleet. If a customer does need to send their unit off to a manufacturer and it's four to six weeks' lead time, then we can actually give them a hire product to cover that downtime and ensure they're still working.

A COURTESY OTDR. YOUR CUSTOMERS MUST LOVE THAT.

BRIANNA GRANT: For me it's about just giving the customer everything they need, all under one roof. Often customers have to buy the product in one place, they get trained somewhere else and then they have to send it here to get it serviced and they call up someone else to get it hired. With us, they only have to set up one supplier.

RHYS BRINE: We specialise in just two manufacturers; we sell really only VIAVI and Sumitomo. Sumitomo is a fusion splicer brand. Anyone in the sales team can tell you about these products because we sell a limited range. It's not like you walking into Argos and you want to know how many springs are on that trampoline, they can't tell you because they don't specialise. There's a large amount of items available. We try and make sure that we know every item.

IS THIS AN EXCLUSIVE ARRANGEMENT WITH VIAVI? HOW DOES IT WORK?

RHYS BRINE: VIAVI have a number of distributors in the UK. What makes us prominent is our access to the market, the contractors, the network providers that we deal with. Ross may be better placed to answer this, but I think that's why VIAVI were excited to have us on board.

ROSS STODDART: It's not an exclusive agreement, but we're delighted to have Fibreplus on board. It's exciting to be able to expand our reach in the market with their wealth of expertise in this area and their end-to-end offering.

WHAT KIND OF OPPORTUNITIES DO YOU SEE WITH THIS PARTNERSHIP GOING FORWARD?

BRIANNA GRANT: It's exciting because historically we've specialised in FTTX and fibre-to-the-home cabinets, the typical network, but with the wider array of products that VIAVI sells and manufactures we're able to get into all kinds of new areas now. Data centres have now become designated Critical National Infrastructure so that's huge for us. More rail, transportation, renewables, aviation, security. If there's a connection to be made, if there's internet to be found, then fibre is going to be involved. It's really exciting for us to be able to take advantage of that wider array of products to offer to people throughout the industry and adjacent industries.

ROSS STODDART: You just have to look at the rate at which data centres are currently and will continue to expand over the next couple of years, a lot of which is driven by AI and machine learning. And all of that requires a lot more bandwidth.

There are also various initiatives being driven by governments across the globe to protect and secure critical infrastructure such as communications networks. So there are many potential business opportunities for VIAVI with our partners like Fibreplus.

HOW DO YOU MEASURE CUSTOMER SATISFACTION?

RHYS BRINE: We keep in touch with our customers. Our account managers are on the ball, we have those relationships, we have that rapport that we can ask those questions. That was one of the reasons why so far the switch has been a success, because the customers will buy the products because they believe in us as a company and the support that we provide and trust that we are giving them the right information.

But ultimately the biggest metric for customer satisfaction is retention rate. And as Rhys says, their customers keep coming back.

IT'S RELATIONSHIP-DRIVEN, ALL THIS, ISN'T IT?

BRIANNA GRANT: We're talking to our customers every two weeks. We follow up with them to ask you've bought

something recently, how is it? What are your experiences? Oh, you have an issue? We can solve that on the phone for you right now. We're in very consistent conversation with everyone, regardless.

ROSS, DOES THIS ARRANGEMENT WITH FIBREPLUS PRECLUDE YOU FROM SELLING DIRECT?

ROSS STODDART: VIAVI has many channel partners across the UK, Europe and beyond, as well as selling direct. It often depends on the products or solution they are working with. This agreement isn't about restricting anything, it's about expanding our reach into the market and the services offered to that market.

THERE'S BEEN A LOT OF TALK ABOUT CONSOLIDATION AND IT HASN'T QUITE HAPPENED AT THE RATE EVERYONE WAS PREDICTING. WHAT ARE YOUR VIEWS AND HOW WILL IT IMPACT YOUR BUSINESS?

RHYS BRINE: It could go either way. It depends how the consolidation works, who you are in with at the time, who's making the most purchases, what equipment they use. There are so many factors to it. I don't know whether it'd be a positive or a negative at this point. Every company in the UK is looking at ways they can diversify.

IN WHAT WAYS?

RHYS BRINE: Just because every home in the UK has fibre doesn't mean maintenance is going to stop. It doesn't mean that new housing developments aren't going to be built which require fibre.

It also doesn't mean that legacy networks that are 20, 30 years old can't cope with the speed requirements for the data that we require for today aren't going to be replaced. I think there is still a lot there, but companies are looking at ways they can diversify with different products.

BRIANNA GRANT: In this sector one company might swallow up another, but at the end of the day, the engineers are still in charge of getting their kit. They're not necessarily getting it from the larger parent corporation. We're still there, every step of the way. If they need the training, we're still there. If they need to hire short



term, we're still there, regardless of who actually is owning that particular business, they're still having to get the product, get the training that they need, and we're still there.

EVERYONE SEEMS TO BE TALKING ABOUT RURAL BROADBAND; WHAT ARE YOUR VIEWS ON HOW IT'S GOING TO EVOLVE OVER THE NEXT 12 TO 18 MONTHS?

RHYS BRINE: There are some companies that are putting in great work in rural communities and I think we deal with a few of them, they're pushing harder than ever to push it. BDUK are obviously providing funding for those rural communities, it's all in place. It just comes down to these companies who are focusing on rural to really push it through.

Access is the problem. Rural broadband often has to deal with protected lands, land ownership discussions, policy and regulatory challenges and the cost of building new infrastructure out to those areas.

HOW COMMON IS THIS ISSUE?

RHYS BRINE: Weather has a huge impact as well-hardened ground during winter, flooding in spring all cause issues when completing long-term projects.

ROSS STODDART: There isn't any one blueprint for rural which is part of the problem; even within the one country like the UK, deployments can be very different. It's not necessarily all broadband either, we're also seeing fixed wireless access solutions being offered to give gigabit services to customers that way,

which requires a different test procedure and different hardware.

IS SUSTAINABILITY SOMETHING THAT YOU TALK ABOUT AS PARTNERS? HOW DO YOU APPROACH THIS?

RHYS BRINE: It's about changing the way we work. Let's say engineers are testing links that are anywhere from 50m to 5km long, and if they've got to drive from one end to the other or they've got to repeat tests, then if you just take the diesel used for example, it is a big impact on the environment. We are working to eliminate that.

BRIANNA GRANT: Repairing products even after it passed its warranty is a big focus. If people are using technology and they want to upgrade, we will do trade-ins, we'll repair it. And given that we know what we're doing, we're able to then sell that onto customers who maybe don't need the latest and greatest of technology. At least it keeps it off a landfill for that much longer.

ROSS STODDART: Absolutely. VIAVI has been making strides in this area over a number of years now, and every year we publish an Environmental, Social and Governance (ESG) report which can be viewed on our website.

IS THERE ANYTHING YOU'D LIKE TO COMMUNICATE TO OUR READERS?

RHYS BRINE: I'd like to challenge your readers and the customers to see if we can save them time and money. Even on that environmental point, can we help them and reduce their environmental costs by improving testing procedures.

ROSS STODDART: We're delighted to have Fibreplus on board and I'm excited to see where things take us over the coming months and years. In addition to Rhys' comments, I would challenge every provider to consider how they test and monitor their network.

Ultimately, the only way to verify the quality of a network build is with a proper testing procedure; otherwise, you're just praying and hoping what you're putting in the ground is going to work.

If these are the networks that will form the foundations of the communication infrastructure for future generations, then our industry has a duty to do that to the highest standards possible.

www.fibreplus.co.uk

www.viavisolutions.com