Rebranding *is* successful *for* globally expanding Sparkle

It's a partner in Seabras-1 and in Sea-Me-We 5, it has a new presence in the fast-expanding market in Vietnam, and its Iranian connection is almost ready for service, Sparkle CEO **Alessandro Talotta** tells Alan Burkitt-Gray

You've probably noticed, but it's just Sparkle now, no longer Telecom Italia Sparkle or even TI Sparkle. The move has been successful, says Alessandro Talotta, chairman and CEO. "It was very tactical," he says. "We wanted to show Sparkle as one company. Operating worldwide as we do, of course we need to have a single brand as we serve areas such as the Mediterranean, Europe and the Americas – and that's why we did it."

The Sparkle group "includes more than 30 companies, so that was a very important message to the market and for all the people in the company to show that we are one single company", he adds.

There's been "really very positive" feedback since the change. "It was refreshing. [Customers] were thinking of a new company – more agile. Our new brand is very important in expressing the concepts of our new strategy."

Beyond Sparkle, things have been changing in the wider Telecom Italia group, which a couple of years ago also rebranded, to TIM. "You know that we are 100% part of the TIM group. We have had a change of the management team – as well as a new shareholder."

International partner

The biggest shareholder is the French media group Vivendi, and there have been changes of group chairman and group CEO at TIM. "Of course Sparkle sees some benefit with the new situation because we partner with an international company," says Talotta.

"This can give us more visibility in terms of international footprint. But it's business as usual. The more international, the better it is for us. The more in terms of international shareholder activities the better it is for us," he says. "It is an opportunity when you have such a big international shareholder which is in telecommunications and is as well a content provider, and a well known brand in Europe." It is, he adds, business as usual. "Our shareholder can leverage our very good global network, which represents an interesting opportunity for Sparkle and its shareholders."

Sparkle already has wide international interests. It is, for example, one of the investors in Seabras-1, the new cable between Brazil and the US. "Seabras is a very strategic investment and the largest we have done in recent years," says Talotta. "It is important for the community that cooperates between North to South America and vice versa."

The cable is "state of the art in terms of technology", he says. "It gives us the opportunity of maintaining our leadership in the Caribbean and South America."

It will result in "more capacity demand coming on the transatlantic route", and then on the Pacific routes. "We have three different routes from South America to North America, and the Pacific leg will be clear for the new demand coming from the Pacific area. The overall network will benefit in terms of reliability and capability."

It is "end-to-end seamless technology in terms of connections, supporting the overall interoperability of our global backbone", he adds. "We have another

system that is in Europe but we are working to have the same capacity, the same and seamless technology – more software and massive management of the routing of the traffic to perform better."

Talotta hints at other routes Sparkle may be interested in. "This depends on the growth in the economies of Asia, the Middle East and Africa. We are trying to implement some important projects to ensure we can capture the increasing demand of those countries," he says.

"Sea-Me-We 5 is an example. We are growing our presence in the Middle East. We are increasing the computing in our data centres," says Talotta. "There are many countries where the cable lands and where we are interested in operating. In particular we are interested in developing our presence in Pakistan, in east Africa and currently we are going to develop our network where the demand is growing."

Meanwhile "we have increasing presence of Sparkle in places like Vietnam, where there is more traffic and more business". Vietnam is "one of the largest countries in Asia in terms of IP demand", and it is "the seventh largest market in Asia in terms of fixed lines", with mobile penetration at 134%, and IP traffic growing fast. "Vietnam represents one of the top markets in Asia, 2.5% of total IP demand in Asia."

In Europe, "we are diversifying the routes to ensure maximum reliability and resilience", he adds. "For example in Italy we will have three separate diversified legs to guarantee 100% business continuity, and we never stop improving performance."

Sparkle will increase its presence in Frankfurt, London, Amsterdam and Paris, "where we see the demand is increasing a lot", and "the backbone will extend through Italy and will seamlessly connect Sicily to the rest of Europe", he says.

Ready for service in Iran
Last year Sparkle brought international attention when it announced its partnership with Telecommunication Infrastructure Company (TIC) of Iran to extend its global backbone. It will be ready

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> **Alessandro Talotta, CEO, Sparkle**

for service in a few weeks, he tells me.

"We are very happy to be the first international service provider to partner with TIC of Iran," says Talotta. "Iran is a very promising market. Now it is a reality. Iran will become a regional hub serving the neighbouring countries and we are very proud to be the first international provider there." Business is "complex" with "many variables" and "they are installing our equipment in Tehran right now", aiming for service "by the end of October".

He's already touched on data centres, the most famous of which in Sparkle's network it in Palermo, Sicily. "Palermo is continually expanding with new customers and content providers," says Talotta. "It is now in a dynamic of self-sustaining growth and it has proven a very successful strategy."

Elsewhere in the Mediterranean region, "we have upgraded our existing data centre in Koropi, Athens", and "we have just received the important Tier III design document certification for the new Metamorphosis-2 data centre", which is also in Athens. "Metamorphosis-2 will be 5,900 square metres, adjacent to and connected to Metamorphosis-1, and it responds to the ever increasing demand

for colocation and cloud services in Greece." It has a power usage effectiveness of 1.2, one of the lowest in the industry, he says proudly.

Outside Sparkle, Talotta has an active role in MEF, formerly the Metro Ethernet Forum (there are other telecoms and technology groups called MEF). One of its main projects is related to lifecycle service orchestration, he says. "With the use of APIs, they will automate completely the interoperability of multiple operator networks and facilitate the delivery of new services," says Talotta.

"MEF is contributing tremendously to the industry," and Sparkle is "very active – we constantly work with other partners to demonstrate the practical examples of the design", he adds. "We have dedicated testing labs in Catania, in Sicily, which is where we test MEF-designed technology remotely, collaborating with other MEF members' testing labs." Catania "is also where we are introducing the new technology to orchestrate our data centres, in Sicily, Greece and Turkey", he notes.

"The fact that MEF and we – together with all its members – are contributing to increase the level of technology in Sparkle's network and across the industry is very positive," says Talotta.

"One clear message I want to give is that we at Sparkle always strive to increase the efficiency of our network, try to expand as quickly as possible to meet the demand of bandwidth by customers, and to do it automatically. That is the way we operate the network. Orchestrating of the data centres is another example; seamless interoperability from different operators is again another example."

The benefit is "that we can operate our network with software, automatically and remotely, and we can have a homogeneous way of transporting and managing the bits in our network", he notes.

Customers "can select their functions, they can program the network remotely, and they can have immediate monitoring of their services and they can increase the quality if they need for some services", he says. "They can select bandwidth and integrate and deliver new capacity. This is the way we want to have efficiency in our network for our customers."

Sparkle is "happy to increase the value of the wholesale market above the connectivity", says Talotta. "My team is working every day to guarantee that such a big market would be maintained in terms of value, creating value for the customers and creating value also for us."

The company maintains "unvaried" its level of investments year by year, "and by collaborating as much as possible with the industry to guarantee new technology implementation and services." ◗