

## TECHNOLOGY

# AIS unveils Google Chromecast, challenging TrueVisions

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The battle over the video-on-demand (VOD) market in Thailand is intensifying as Advanced Info Service (AIS) begins to flex its muscles as an important broadcaster of premium content.

With rapidly changing viewership behaviour of digital media taking place via smartphones and tablets, the country's largest mobile operator yesterday debuted what it dubbed Thailand's sole broadcaster of Google Chromecast service.

To use a Chromecast device, retailing at 1,490 baht each, users plug it into their TV's HDMI port and connect to their internet network through a laptop, smartphone or tablet to stream their favourite shows through an app onto a big screen.

The move by AIS is set to change the landscape of mobile competition, revive Internet Protocol television (IPTV) and pose a new challenge to other video-streaming and cable TV operators.

However, the continued presence of piracy will continue to dictate prices in the video-streaming markets of many countries including Thailand, hindering the industry's growth.

More importantly, the bandwidth requirements for customers to stream HD video content are a critical challenge to market growth.

Suvit Arayavilaipong, AIS's senior vice-president for product management, said the company is concentrating on increasing its original video screening output and adding more premium content to serve the appetite for on-demand video services.

AIS gained major ground with the latest signing of an exclusive deal with Google, securing the rights as exclusive distributor of the Google Chromecast dongle, allowing broadcast of every TV show and movie on Google Play accounts.

AIS also recently signed agreements with HBO, Fox and the NBA, giving the company the broadcasting rights to movies, sports and programmes from the three, following TrueVisions' failure to renew a content distribution agreement with HBO.

"We are determined to be a technological convergence company — of networks,



Deals are offered at Thailand Mobile Expo 2017, which runs through Sunday at Queen Sirikit National Convention Center. AIS is launching the Google Chromecast device at the fair. PAWAT LAOPAISARNTAKSIN

content and devices — as we strive to provide modern digital lifestyle products and services to serve users' needs," Mr Suvit said.

"We want to differentiate our services from rivals, staying many steps ahead of the competition."

AIS has 1.3 million customers signed up to AIS Play, an application service that allows customers to access Hollywood movies and sporting events from company partners via their smartphones. But less than 2% of AIS Play customers pay for the mobile content service, with the vast majority accessing the services for free.

AIS has an additional 200,000 customers using AIS Playbox, a set-top box with a built-in WiFi connection that converts a conventional TV to a smart TV via the AIS broadband fibre network.

It charges customers fees starting from 599 baht a month for the Playbox service, including fibre-optic home broadband internet and exclusive TV programmes.

Mr Suvit said AIS has 300,000 fibre-optic broadband customers, representing 4% of the local home broadband internet market.

The company has 41 million mobile subscribers.

"We aim to have 2.5 million active users of AIS Playbox and AIS Play, of which 2.1 million will be on the mobile platform," Mr Suvit said.

He said AIS does not expect its VOD service to generate revenue in the short term, adding that the shift from voice-based revenue to data-based revenue for mobile operators will take at least one decade.

According to Mr Suvit, AIS's VOD service will not directly target pay TV operator TrueVisions, as Thais spend an average of 10 minutes watching video on mobile devices each time they turn on video.

"Our content development is aimed at enhancing our customers' mobile experience and differentiating ourselves from the competition," he said.

An industry analyst at CIMB Securities Thailand said the development by AIS looks set to put TrueVisions under pressure, now that the speed of both home broadband and mobile internet are no longer a barrier to the growth of video-streaming consumption.

TrueVisions also lost some of its most popular programming over the past few years, including the English Premier League and HBO.

"To retain its customer base, TrueVisions needs to adjust its monthly service packages to deal with the increasing number of unhappy customers," said the industry analyst, who asked not to be named.

True Corporation recently announced a relaunch of its IPTV service in response to AIS's move. True started its IPTV service in 2008.

However, the analyst noted that True was unlikely to aggressively promote its IPTV service because such a campaign could hurt TrueVisions' pay TV service.

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