



Profile >

BILL HOLT:
Director of Sales and Customer Service
REACH GLOBAL SERVICES

BORN: 23 DEC 1947

WORK HISTORY:
1969: JOINED AT&T
1990: MOVED TO MERCATELA
2001: HIRED BY REACH

THE SPICE OF LIFE

REACH'S BILL HOLT THRIVES ON THE DIVERSITY OF THE FAR EAST FINDS **GUY MATTHEWS**.

> If **variety** is the key to keeping a job interesting, then Bill Holt need not fear boredom. As director of sales and customer service with Reach, Asia's largest international carrier of voice, business data and internet traffic, he serves a daunting range of customers across multiple borders from his base in Hong Kong.

Asia is in Holt's blood after 10 years on the continent. What started as a purely commercial challenge in 1993, when he was sent by AT&T to build a sales organisation in North Asia, has plainly evolved into a full-on love affair. "I was amazed at the contrasts between all the different cultures when I first came out, and quickly got addicted to the steepness of the learning curve, which has barely flattened out at all," he says. "You simply can't be an expert in Asia, and that makes it exciting."

All this excitement was a long way off when New York-born Holt started out at AT&T in 1969. The contrast between the telecoms industry then and now could not, he says, be more marked. "In those days you held a whole load of positions so you got a good grounding in all areas of the business. You don't get a firm foundation like that these days."

Not that Holt is in any way wedded to an old school ethos. He got his first taste of deregulation long before the concept was in common currency. "In 1983, I moved to AIS American Bell, the first ever deregulated telecoms subsidiary."

Among his roles in this pioneering venture was government procurement. "This taught me patience, patience and more patience. Once you're familiar with government procurement processes, carrier procurement is a piece of cake."

The key turning point in Holt's career, though, was the 1993 posting to Asia. It wasn't long before he was appointed regional managing director for AT&T's business sales and operations across the Asia-Pacific. In this role he led a multinational team of sales and support staff providing voice, data and IP services to high-end corporate customers in more than 20 Asian countries.

In 1998, after 29 years with AT&T, Holt left to become managing partner of Mercatela, a Hong Kong-based e-commerce consultancy specialising in web design and interactive marketing, reckoning that this would be an interesting new direction, and a change from telecoms.

Holt says that the Mercatela interlude was one of the most exciting parts of his career, but when it went the way of so many other new economy start-ups, he was tempted back into the telecoms fold following an approach by Reach.

Holt's immediate goals include making a success of the company's recent strategic move to combine its voice and data business units as one. "Looking forward, the challenge is to add maximum value to the service we provide customers," he says. "I want Reach to provide the best possible support to our customers and to our customers' customers."

Holt is more than aware that claims like these can carry little currency in today's industry unless backed by firm action. "Let's be honest, being easy to do business with is not what this industry is known for. I instinctively distrust expressions like customer driven and customer focused. But the fact is that I have to be so much on top of my customers' needs that they wouldn't even think of going to someone else."

Holt intends to keep Reach in pole position within its market against the likelihood of increased competition from outside Asia. "We've got the best coverage of anyone in Asia, so the message to other carriers is 'Don't build it, we've got it already'."

He believes this approach makes cultural as well as logistical sense. "A market of predominantly US and Europe based carriers has got to realise that Asia is not a country. Putting a circuit into Shanghai and Singapore is not the same thing. Some people, particularly Americans, probably think both places are in China."

Whatever its inconveniences, Holt cannot imagine swapping his far eastern lifestyle for another. "I couldn't go back and work somewhere predictable and homogeneous," he claims. ■