

Vodafone should stick to Ponsonby

FOR the local chief executive of a massive multinational to disrespect a bunch of well-respected, small, Kiwi businesses is bad form at best but Russell Stanners of Vodafone could at least try to get his facts right.

The Wireless Internet Service Providers or WISPs are legends in their local communities but till now have been invisible as a national group.

There are 30 or more of them, mostly started by local people, often farmers, with a bit of technical knowledge about wireless. They've mushroomed by knowing their territory, learning from experience and swamping their customers with personal service.

Collectively, the WISPs have more than 40,000 rural broadband customers. That's significantly more than Vodafone. Stanners says the WISPs "do not appear to be contributing any money".

Let me assure him many are making contributions, just as they have invested their own money to get their businesses to their current stage.

Stanners says Vodafone and its partners are contributing \$75 million. We should not be surprised that Vodafone is cash-rich – you and I paid it \$80m for the first round of the Rural Broadband Initiative. In return Vodafone took several years to deliver just 23,835 customers, according to the latest official figures.

Do the maths and tell me that was a good use of public money. Much more of rural New Zealand could have been covered by the WISPs with that money had they not been competing against subsidised multi-nationals.

And he boasts Vodafone can now build a cell site for \$50,000 instead of the \$500,000 in RBI1. What? Trust me, the WISPs can build for prices way, way sharper than that.

WISPs are the best solution for RBI2.

First, they are local people with intimate knowledge of the topography, the customers and their needs. They clamber over hills and look for line of sight to customers then they install radio gear, all in environments where the Vodafone crew from Auckland would be afraid of their handmade Italian Leonardos getting stained by sheep droppings.

Second, they know customer service. I dined with one recently. During dessert he took a call from a customer who couldn't find her modem. From the restaurant, by going into a photo library he was able to explain patiently exactly which room and which side of the cabinet the modem was in, getting her back on line in minutes.

In a past life I've enjoyed the odd meal with Stanners but I struggle to remember him interrupting his dinner

to accept a phone call from a customer. They would have been waiting forever in the call centre queue.

Third, the WISPs know about resilience and reliability. In Kaikoura and more recently in remote Minginui the local WISP was the only communications service that stayed live through the emergency. These guys know how to build imaginatively, having regard to local materials and conditions. They can deliver the very best coverage possible, faster than cellular companies based on their track records.

Let the mobile companies concentrate on Ponsonby where they are most naturally at home. The Government has been right to give the WISPs a head start in RBI2 – rural NZ is their turf.

Ernie Newman

Wireless Internet Service Providers Association