

Poste joins Italy's love affair with the mobile



Paco Serinelli/AFP

Massimo Sarmi, the Poste Italiane chief executive, is searching for new clients.

By Eric Svlvers

ROME: Poste Italiane, the postal company owned by the Italian government, said Monday that it would begin selling mobile phone services by the end of the year as it aims for a slice of one of the world's most lucrative, yet saturated, markets.

Poste Italiane, which plans to sell the services in partnership with one of the country's four existing cellphone operators, will pay a fee to use their infrastructure as it sets up what is known as a mobile virtual network operator. The company aims to have two million clients five years after the service has been introduced, the Poste chief executive, Massimo Sarmi, said at a presentation. He declined to say which of the existing Italian operators he expected to sign the accord.

"We have spoken with Telecom Italia Mobile, Vodafone and 3 and they're all interested," Sarmi said during an interview after the presentation. "There are

a lot of cellphone users in Italy, but we think there is room for six million new SIM cards to be activated by 2009." He said Poste was counting on getting most clients from those six million. "I'm not counting on getting many clients who use the existing operators, but it could happen," he added.

To grab new clients, Poste plans to leverage its 14,000 branches, which reach into every corner of Italy, Sarmi said. About 1.5 million people enter an Italian post office every day, and the company has a successful banking business with 20 million clients — holders of bank accounts, credit cards or pre-paid cards that could be directly linked to pay for cellphone services.

"We have a huge number of clients so we can afford to have very low margins in our businesses, and that will be the same when we launch the cellphone services," Sarmi said. Italy already has more SIM cards than inhabitants, but there is no reliable figure for how many people actually have a cellphone because some have multiple SIM cards.

Many innovative services, like pre-paid phone cards and mobile television, have made their European debut in Italy.

Virtual operators have existed in the United States and Europe for several years, including Virgin Mobile in Britain, Yoigo in Spain and Beyond Mobile in the United States. But most have failed to make a significant impact on the market. The two exceptions are Denmark and Germany, where virtual operators like Debitel have carved out more than 20 percent of the market, according to a Poste Italiane document.

Poste Italiane also said Monday that 2006 net income almost doubled to €676 million, or \$900 million, from €349 million, while sales rose €600 million, or 3.5 percent, to €17.1 billion.

Poste partecipa alla storia d'amore dell'Italia con il telefonino (ca)

Ieri Poste Italiane ha annunciato che inizierà a commercializzare servizi di telefonia cellulare entro la fine dell'anno nell'intento di assicurarsi una quota di uno dei mercati più remunerativi del mondo. Pur senza precisare con quali dei gestori del settore Poste sia più propensa a firmare un accordo, l'Amministratore Delegato Massimo Sarmi ha dichiarato che il suo gruppo "ha parlato con Telecom Italia Mobile, con Vodafone e con 3 e che tutti sono interessati" a concludere un accordo.

