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SUMMER 2019
THE MAGAZINE OF
RURAL TELCO MANAGEMENT

Marketing Is... Rural Telcos Explore New Ways to Connect With Customers



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FEATURES

Marketing Is ... Rural Telcos Explore New Ways to Connect With Customers

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BY LAURA WITHERS

NTCA Vice President of Strategic Communications Laura Withers shares highlights from NTCA's first-ever Marketing + Sales Conference in New Orleans! This year's marketing meeting featured thought-provoking keynote speeches, a presentation honoring our Marketing Excellence Award winners and brand new sessions, including "Innovation Ignition!"

22 Taglines: That's Saying a Lot!

BY TARA YOUNG

Rural broadband companies have changed as telecom technology has changed, but their mission has stayed the same: serving their communities with the best technology and with customer service that can't be topped. They convey this message using different slogans. What do these taglines communicate to customers? How have they changed over the years, and how have rural telco customers responded? We ask several NTCA members to answer these questions and more in our marketing issue.

28 Happy Anniversary! Celebrating Company Landmarks

BY JENNIFER LUBELL

Anniversaries are worth celebrating, especially for longtime community institutions like rural telecommunications companies. Our members are concerned with marketing these milestones to their communities and allowing their friends and neighbors to share in the landmark celebration; they outline how they celebrated in style in this feature piece.

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RURAL TELECOM

Rural Telecom (ISSN: 0744-2548)
Summer 2019
Quarterly, Vol. 38, No. 3

Subscriptions to Rural Telecom are \$35 for NTCA–The Rural Broadband Association members; \$135 for nonmembers. To order or for questions about a current subscription, email publications@ntca.org.

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4121 Wilson Boulevard, Suite 1000,
Arlington, VA 22203
Phone: 703-351-2000
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Publisher: NTCA–The Rural Broadband Association

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Graphic Design by CBD², Sterling, Va.

Printed by More Vang, Alexandria, Va.

Rural Telecom, established in 1981, is the quarterly magazine published by NTCA–The Rural Broadband Association, a nonprofit, cooperative corporation formed in 1954 under the laws of the District of Columbia.

NTCA's Mission: NTCA–The Rural Broadband Association works on behalf of small broadband providers who are working on behalf of rural America.

NTCA represents more than 800 small, rural, locally owned and operated broadband companies in the United States and abroad, as well as

state and regional telephone associations and companies that are the suppliers of products and services to the small and rural broadband industry. Our readers are the managers, directors, attorneys and key employees of these telephone companies, as well as consultants, government officials and telecommunications experts.

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Editorial, advertising and subscription officers:
Periodicals postage is paid at Arlington, Va., and at additional mailing offices. Postmaster, send address changes to "Rural Telecom," 4121 Wilson Boulevard, Suite 1000, Arlington, VA 22203-1801.

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Smart TVs and Regular Old Coffee

By Christian Hamaker

WE'RE COFFEE SNOBS, BUT WE LIKE OUR WORKPLACE COFFEE

Although “it seems America is becoming a coffee-snob country,” we’re largely satisfied with our workplace coffee options.

For now.

Nearly 85% of respondents to a National Coffee Association USA annual survey said they are “very satisfied” or “somewhat satisfied” with

the coffee choices at their workplace. But that could be changing, especially as workplaces shift to pod coffee makers, wrote Tim Carman.

“Only 43% were ‘very satisfied’ this year with the coffee from Keurig machines and the like, down 14 points from 2015,” Carman wrote.

Source: washingtonpost.com



YOUR ‘SKINNY’ TV BUNDLE IS FATTENING UP

Have you noticed that your “skinny” TV bundle—initially priced to appeal to those looking to cut costs—is getting more expensive? “Many of the popular ‘skinny bundle’ options, like Hulu with Live TV, YouTube TV and DirecTV Now, have increased their package prices this year,” wrote Sara Fischer.

Although the increased prices usually come after channels are added, the price creep shows “it’s difficult for smaller digital TV packages to compete with the bloated and expensive pay TV packages that they sought to displace,” Fischer wrote. “The price increases across many of these skinny bundle packages show that the companies couldn’t make the lower prices sustainable or profitable for the long haul.”

Source: axios.com



WESTERN TOWNS BUCK RURAL POPULATION TREND

Reports of rural population flight aren't hard to find, but pockets in one part of the United States—the West—are bucking the trend.

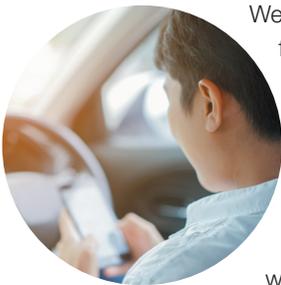
Hamilton, Mont., is home to a microbrewery started by two people who grew up in Hamilton and returned after college. It generates more than \$1 million annually in sales. A government biosafety facility also has brought new workers to the area, which continues to attract retirees seeking recreation and affordable land. The diverse appeal helps explain why the Hamilton population is up more than 10% since 2010.

Hamilton's growth is part of a trend, wrote David J. Lynch: "Western towns with fewer than 5,000 residents grew by an average of nearly 8% from 2010 to 2017, according to the Census Bureau, while those in the Northeast and Midwest shrank. Those in the South grew barely 1%."

Source: www.duluthnewtribune.com



THE GIG ECONOMY HAS BEEN OVERHYPED



We've all heard about the gig economy—a form of job-to-job employment that reportedly is helping people make ends meet, or that has replaced full-time employment for some. Think Uber and Lyft as prime examples.

But a funny thing happened on the way to making the gig economy the new normal for today's workers. Two labor economists who saw the gig workforce increasing 5% between 2005 and 2015 said that increase had been too high. "Now they think it is more like one or two [percentage] points," wrote Annie Lowrey. A government survey showed only 3.8% of workers fit the gig-worker profile—the same percentage as in 2005.

"The gig economy isn't taking over, but it has become a useful emblem of what it is like to work for a living in late-stage capitalism," Lowrey wrote. "No wonder it seemed to be everywhere."



Source: theatlantic.com

WHY ARE SMART TVS SO CHEAP? THE ANSWER IS UNSETTLING.

How much did you pay for your smart TV? You probably got a good deal. For a reason.

"Analysts estimate that smart TVs now make up about 70% of all new TV sales," wrote Alexis Madrigal. "The television is no longer a mere display, but a full-fledged computer, for good and for ill. And what is a computer now? On the one hand, it's something companies sell to consumers for money. But after you've purchased an internet-connected device of any kind, it begins to generate information that the company can use itself or sell to third parties."

"This is why your TV was so cheap. But it also changes the relationship the TV makers have with their customers. Consumers are no longer their sole revenue stream, but one among several. CBS and Netflix are more important to their business success than you are."

Source: theatlantic.com



The 'Secret Sauce' for Rural Success

If you're looking for the key to rural prosperity, the National Endowment for the Arts encourages you to look to the creative sector.

"The 'secret sauce' for those prospering rural areas is their ability to leverage their creative sector assets to catalyze economic and workforce development initiatives,"

wrote NGA Economic Opportunity. The group said the U.S. Department of Agriculture and the National Endowment for the Arts have found that:

- Rural counties that are home to performing arts organizations experienced population growth three times faster and household incomes up to \$6,000 higher than rural counties lacking such organizations.
- Rural counties with businesses that integrate branding and design services recovered more quickly from the recession.

"Creative and cultural assets can be used as a springboard for local economic development—that is, they can catalyze growth and amplify broader community planning and rural Main Street development," NGA wrote.

Source: medium.com



HOW SMALL TOWNS BENEFIT FROM BIG-CITY PROSPERITY

If your rural town is prospering, chances are it's close to a big city, wrote Amy Liu and Nathan Arnosti.

"There is already clear evidence that the economic prosperity of cities and metropolitan areas benefits small towns," Liu and Arnosti wrote. "Studies in Georgia, Illinois, Minnesota, New York, Washington and Wisconsin have found that urban and suburban centers subsidize rural areas by generating more revenue for states than they receive back in education, infrastructure and other public investments.

"Rural communities also tend to have stronger economies when they are similar to or near cities. For instance, 'micropolitan areas'—rural communities with small urban centers—have rebounded to near-pre-recession employment levels, and rural communities adjacent to cities fare better than remote counties."

Yet the authors acknowledge that proximity to cities does not solely explain rural prosperity.

"Some direct investments, such as broadband and rural entrepreneurship, can improve rural fortunes," they wrote.

Source: nytimes.com



TV ANTENNAS ARE STARTING TO DOT THE SKYLINE AGAIN

Have you noticed an uptick in rooftop TV antennas in your community? A Consumer Technology Association survey shows that 31% of U.S. households have an antenna hooked up to at least one TV set—up from 28% in 2015 and 20% in 2009.

The uptick is being driven by 25–34-year-olds, 45% of whom are using TV antennas. That contrasts to just 19% of 65–74-year-olds who do the same.

Source: fastcompany.com



● COMINGS AND GOINGS ●



Scott Behn is leaving his position as chief executive officer (CEO) of Mosaic Telecom (Cameron, Wis.) to join Aureon, a business solutions provider in Des Moines, Iowa, as its CEO.



Troy Nimrick is the new general manager at Oneida Telephone Exchange (Oneida, Ill.), replacing a retiring David Olson.



Curtis Taylor, CEO of Surry Communications (Dobson, N.C.) has announced his retirement after 38 years. Richard “Richie” C. Parker will take his place as CEO. Richie has been part of the Surry Communications family in various duties since May 1991.



Lisa Epperley will soon retire as general manager of Pembroke Telephone Cooperative (PemTel; Pembroke, Va.) and Tony Eaton, a longtime employee of the cooperative, will be promoted to take her place.

● IN EVERY ISSUE

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FOLLOW ALONG AT WWW.NTCA.ORG/RURALISCOOL

Thanks to all of the amazing NTCA members who participated in the #throwback social media campaign—it was fun to celebrate you, and the stories you shared inspired our entire NTCA team.

SHIRLEY BLOOMFIELD

@SBloomfield15

I am loving our member stories about their commitment to rural broadband in the past and for the future. Keep sending them in for #FlashbackFriday tomorrow!

RYAN BOONE

@premiercoo

Our motto at Premier is "Looking Ahead", but we also never want to forget how we got here!! @NTCAconnect #FlashbackFriday



ARVIG

@ArvigHQ

#FlashbackFriday to 2016 when our work in Melrose #Minnesota was recognized by @NTCAconnect at the Smart Rural Community Showcase Awards! #ArvigConnected

SMITHVILLE FIBER

@MySmithville

Our lobby features some legacy technology we've used to serve customers throughout the years. It's a reminder of where we've been and how far we've come in upgrading equipment and service. #FlashbackFriday @NTCAconnect



RTMC

@RTMC1954

#FlashbackFriday We have come a long way since these photos were taken: new equipment & new technology... One thing that isn't new is our commitment to serving rural communities! #BuildBroadbandWithUs #RuralisCool @NTCAconnect #FBF



PIONEER TELEPHONE CO-OP

@PioneerTeleCoop

#FlashbackFriday: The Anheuser-Busch Building, now Pioneer Headquarters, was built in downtown Kingfisher between 1899 and 1900. #GoPioneer #WeareOklahoma



GOLDEN WEST CO-OP

@GoldenWestCoop

Golden West employs over 300 people and has been in business since 1916. Although our services have evolved over the years, our employees are what make us successful. #EverywherePeopleConnect #MotivationMonday

POLAR COMMUNICATIONS

@thinkpolar

Parade season is almost here! We look forward to seeing you at your community parade this summer. Look at how our "float" has changed over the years! @NTCAconnect #FlashbackFriday





Drive Revenue Generation With Integrated Network and Customer Data

As the landscape of how companies do business changes, communication service providers (CSPs) are continuously evolving their business plans to meet the needs of the next big idea. Now, more than ever, data-driven decision-making is at the forefront of a company's business structure. It touches almost all sides of the business—how a company markets, sells, and secures services. They're not just concerned about the company's network data, but the information of potential serviceable addresses in their area.

So where does a company keep this information? Most companies enlist the help of a Customer Record Management System or CRM. The CRM serves as the central repository for all details regarding customers, both current and potential. As the industry changes, executives and their workforce have record of the details they need to make data-driven decision. However the data is often siloed and spread across their respective systems: customer data in the CRM and

network information in their mapping program, with little communication between the two. This blocks companies from creating a holistic picture of their network, real and potential.

With over 40 years of working with communication service providers, Mapcom Systems has noted the industry's need for an interface that compiles consumer data, network mapping and infrastructure into one view. CSPs need a platform that

both seamlessly integrates the details from a CRM with network data and creates a detailed cost report for serviceable addresses. That's why we've created a brand-new integration that allows Salesforce Sales Cloud to talk with M4 RevGen to provide an accelerated estimate of costs. This integration pushes accounts, leads, and opportunities from Salesforce into M4 RevGen and links those details to a serviceable address. M4 RevGen is loaded with both demographic data and unique construction costs to create pricing that is specific to a company's service area. Together with the M4 API, M4 RevGen integrates with Salesforce to give businesses the power to quickly assess and prioritize leads or areas of service to target for marketing and sales initiatives.

To get a better picture of how this integration assists in creating data-driven opportunities, let's look at a practical use case from one company using M4 and Salesforce together. First, M4 RevGen was loaded with demographic data that correlated to serviceable address data. From this point, the company's Marketing department ran a report inside of M4 RevGen on serviceable addresses to create a targeted list. With this list, they supplied content for these addresses, ranging from digital outreach to door hangers at their specific locations.



Once marketing had vetted these locations and found an opportunity, the opportunity was then passed to their Sales team. M4 RevGen then automatically created an estimate of the cost associated with connecting the given structure to the nearest access point. With the

provided route, M4 RevGen accounted for known obstacles such as road crossings, water crossings, and other potential disruptions of service. Once M4 RevGen had compiled all the details, the data was returned to Salesforce for a salesperson to evaluate and decide on actionable steps.

As a mobile friendly app, M4 RevGen can also be used to create on-the-fly estimates for salespeople and sales engineers that are working from the field. This functionality provides the team with insights on the practical serviceability of an address before walking in the door.

With opportunities for automation, tools to derive actionable insights, and a decrease in time to make decisions; CSPs are primed to make scalable strides by integrating CRM and networking mapping systems.

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Looking Toward the Future of Infrastructure and 5G

By Shirley Bloomfield,
Chief Executive Officer, NTCA



INFRASTRUCTURE AND MORE

NTCA is encouraged by the positive momentum in Washington, D.C., surrounding the expansion of broadband across rural America. Just in the last few months, we have seen President Trump and FCC Chairman Ajit Pai announce the launch of the Rural Digital Opportunity Fund, which will provide \$20.4 billion over the course of 10 years to support broadband deployment efforts across rural America. House Energy and Commerce Committee Chairman Frank J. Pallone (D-N.J.) reintroduced the LIFT America Act, which aims to provide resources to build sustainable broadband in rural areas, and we continue to hear buzz about a potential infrastructure bill, emphasizing a shared national interest in expanding rural broadband. I am optimistic about these developments—the sun is shining now on rural broadband and we are ready to take the lead!

FUTURE-PROOF NETWORKS

As the saying goes, “with great power comes great responsibility.” The recent efforts in Washington to target funding and bridge broadband gaps in rural America are incredibly important; however, so is how we get there. We need to capitalize on this momentum with good policy that expands on what works and promotes investment in long-term solutions. That means leveraging existing federal programs with proven track records, like the FCC’s Universal Service Fund, and investing in future-proof fiber-optic networks. Even the great promise of 5G will ultimately rely on substantial fiber investments—especially in rural America. NTCA members understand these challenges more than most and show time and again how to serve as responsible stewards of their communities by providing the best broadband service possible.

SMART RURAL COMMUNITIES

To better celebrate the outstanding work that you do, NTCA recently announced the relaunch of its Smart Rural Communities™ program. Since 2012, the Smart Rural

Community™ program has been promoting member achievement, offering grants for innovative pilots and creating educational programming for those in the rural broadband industry. The enhanced program now has four constituent parts representing new branding and storytelling tools for NTCA members: the Smart Rural Community Provider branding platform; the Gig-Capable Smart Rural Community Provider designation, the Smart Rural Community Showcase Awards and the Smart Rural Community Grants program. Each is accompanied by tools and resources to help program participants market their cutting-edge services and celebrate their contributions to connecting more rural communities.

CYBER WISE

As you continue to connect more rural communities, remember the increasing need to keep your networks safe. In partnership with the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) and the National Institute for Hometown Security (NIHS), NTCA recently announced that it is exploring the creation of a new cyber-threat information sharing forum for small network operators. Our Cyber Wise pilot program will create a central, trusted environment to enable small network operators to share and receive information about cyber threats, vulnerabilities, best practices and/or mitigation activities. We look forward to further exploring the concept of a unique, cyber-threat information sharing forum right-sized for small network operators—and sharing additional updates and lessons learned with members later in 2019. I would also encourage you to register for our Cybersecurity Summit this October 27–29 in Salt Lake City to learn more about how to strategize a plan to protect your company network and its confidential information. ●

● A FEW QUESTIONS ●

How-To Build a Community Directory

By Christian Hamaker



TAMMY REIERSON

Marketing Coordinator for NDTC.

How long have you been marketing coordinator for North Dakota Telephone Co. (NDTC)?

I've been the marketing coordinator with NDTC for 10 years. I began working at NDTC in 1999 in Carrier Access Billing until the marketing coordinator position became available. Prior to working at NDTC, I was the office manager at a dental office.

Tell us about the directory your company puts together each year. How do you get the community involved?

We work with a privately-held directory company in Bismarck, N.D. Classified Directories has its own rep to sell advertising. They use design wizards for the ad creation, page layout, proofing and production of our directory. We also have an online version and a mobile app directory, so the total amount of directories we actually have printed decreases every year.

Temps are hired for door-to-door and drop-off point locations for delivery; we keep enough directories on hand to mail to new connects or upon request.

We involve the community when we solicit photos and connect with any amateur or professional photographers in the area. Customers enjoy the opportunity to send us an image they are proud to have us share. When we used photos from our local chamber/tourism office, it helped identify us as part of the community.

What lessons can you offer to other broadband companies that might want to solicit customer photos for use in their directories?

When doing a seasonally-themed directory photo contest, start the contest early enough to get fresh photos from that time period so people can start thinking about it. Market your contest the same way you do your promotions and across many media platforms. Research local professional and/or amateur photographers, and solicit photos from them if they are interested.

We received many nice images that we could not use because the resolution wasn't high enough, so be sure to request the highest resolution possible; 300 dpi is best for printing. Some mobile phones take great pictures when shared digitally, but they don't work well in print.



Examples of marketing materials used for NDTC's community directory project.

FAST AND FURIOUS

- 1. Rural America is great because:**
We have urban connectivity and friendly, community-supportive citizens.
- 2. One way my community has supported me:**
Offering opportunities for education and growth in my personal and professional development.
- 3. Which is better: a strawberry sundae or hot fudge sundae?**
Strawberry.
- 4. Favorite podcast:**
Any from Father Mike Schmitz. ●

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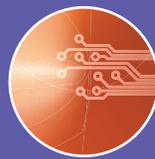
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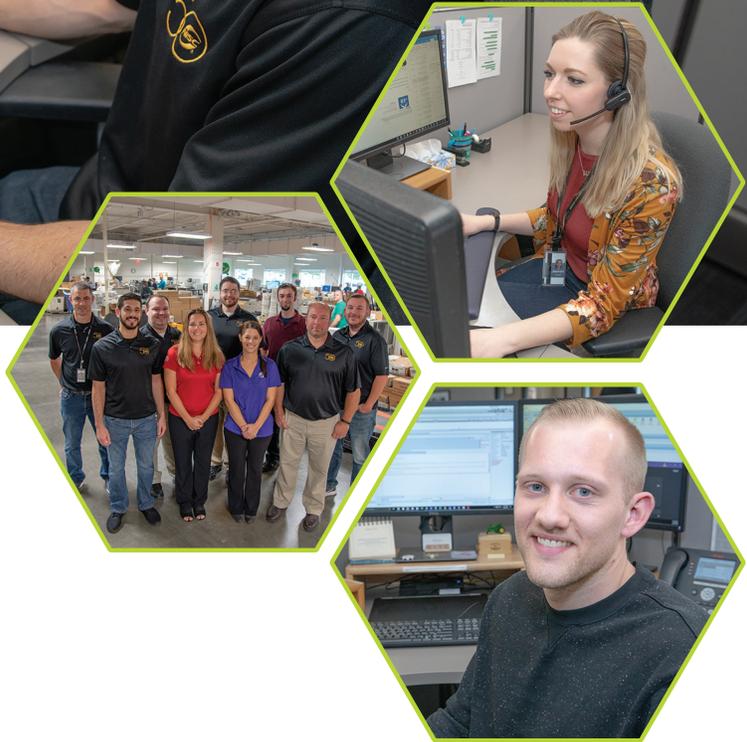
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Marketing Is...

Rural Telcos Explore New Ways to Connect With Customers.

BY LAURA WITHERS

The theme of the 2019 NTCA Marketing & Sales Conference (formerly PR & Marketing Conference), held April 29–May 1, 2019, in New Orleans, La., was “Marketing is” — a play on the idea that marketing can mean many things to many people. What “marketing is” for NTCA members depends on a variety of factors and perspectives, and the conference theme is befitting of the diversity of thought the event draws, with companies of all shapes and sizes represented. Here are some answers to the question, “what is marketing?” through conversations overheard and presentations observed at the inaugural marketing and sales event.



MARKETING IS ... GROWING

The 2019 conference marks the first time NTCA has focused in earnest on marketing and sales strategies for the rural broadband industry, building on the successful PR & Marketing Conference of the past. The 2019 conference also drew more than 300 marketing and sales professionals from across the industry—a new record. More than 50 of them were first-timers.

The conference has attracted communications pros from outside NTCA's membership for several years. In 2019, however, more than a dozen attendees from electric co-ops and ISPs offering broadband services to rural communities outside of traditional ILEC territories were in attendance. This growth reflects new industry entrants as well as an increasing focus on marketing and sales among NTCA members, with more companies sending multiple people.

Ashley Spinks, communications coordinator for NTCA, joined three others in presenting a five-minute "Ignite" talk about the innovation supported by rural broadband connections.

MARKETING IS ... IGNITING CHANGE

One of the favorite sessions during the conference was "Innovation Ignition," featuring short presentations about broadband-supported innovations. The presentations embraced the "Ignite" style, which is like a TED Talk, but shorter. In Ignite presentations, each speaker has five minutes and must use 20 slides, with each slide advancing automatically after 15 seconds, forcing speakers to get to the point, fast.

Larry Montgomery, director of sales and marketing for Etex Telephone Cooperative (Gilmer, Texas), presented his company's sales and customer service strategy, featuring highly personal emails and meaningful face time with business clients. He shared that the co-op's focus on creating long-term customer relationships has transformed its culture by making everyone part of the "Etex family." The true star of the session was a stick of 288 strands of fiber optic cable capable of connecting thousands of Etex customers that Montgomery and his team use to sell the power of broadband and connection.

Brianne Partlow, marketing coordinator at Dakota Central Telecom (Carrington, N.D.), followed with a presentation about the Anne Carlsen Center, a Jamestown, N.D., nonprofit that



“ The 2019 conference also drew more than 300 marketing and sales professionals from across the industry—a new record. More than 50 of them were first-timers. ”



Brianne Partlow (Dakota Central; Carrington, N.D.) gave an inspiring presentation about the work of the Anne Carlsen Center, which supports the needs of individuals with disabilities.



▶ provides disability services and support and is served with Dakota Central's broadband. Partlow shared how a visit to the center opened her eyes to the impact technology has on those touched by developmental disability or delay. While visiting the center, Partlow met a young woman who uses voice-activated devices (like Amazon Echo) and tablets to communicate and write—all supported by Dakota Central's broadband.

Ashley Spinks, NTCA communications coordinator, presented the tale of Citizens Cooperative Telephone (Floyd, Va.), an NTCA member in rural southwest Virginia that recently announced its fiber-to-the-home project. Spinks shared that 97% of Floyd County will have access to gigabit speeds by 2021, and broadband connectivity is already spurring e-commerce in the county.

Because of Citizens' broadband services, Henry's Healthy Pet Foods ships all-natural pet food for squirrels, hamsters, rats and mice all over the world (because even squirrels deserve to be healthy!)

MARKETING IS ... FUTURE-FOCUSED

As I have attended this conference over the years, I have seen firsthand a transformation in its energy and enthusiasm. In the past, chatter about overcoming regulatory challenges and plugging holes in federal cost recovery support was regular fare, leaving many with more questions than solutions.

Now, hallway discussions focus more on bringing broadband to new customers and engaging those customers with unique service offerings. The 2019 Marketing Excellence Awards (formerly TeleChoice Awards) awarded campaigns promoting faster broadband speeds; solutions for "stinky" Internet; brand values of customer support, innovation, integrity and dependability; and community impact activities. Themes of community commitment, service excellence and reliability were featured prominently throughout the award winners, including honorees in the new Sales Strategy and Website Redesign categories.

Another highlight of the conference was the announcement of the improved Smart Rural Communities™ program from NTCA, including a new branding component. NTCA members can now become Smart Rural Community Providers through an annual license, receive a small marketing kit to help tell their success stories and join the network of Smart Rural Communities building a brighter future for small town America. In addition, the Gig Certification program has been brought under the Smart Rural Communities brand through a new Gig-Capable Smart Rural Community Provider logo, which is also available through an annual license. (For more information, visit www.ntca.org/smart).

For those in attendance, the 2019 NTCA Marketing & Sales Conference gave a glimpse into the future. Marketing plans are in place, and those plans are being executed in furious fashion to connect more rural Americans to cutting-edge technologies. What's more, talk of innovative partnerships—overcoming distance and density with innovation and entrepreneurship—is both invigorating and inspiring. ●

Laura Withers is vice president of strategic communications at NTCA. Contact her at lwithers@ntca.org.



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Taglines: That's Saying a Lot!

BY TARA YOUNG

Rural telecommunications providers have a legacy of exceeding the needs of their constituencies—bringing telephone service to rural areas, being early adopters of dial up internet service, and linking rural communities to the rest of the world with broadband. Telcos also excel at layering value-added services onto those broadband connections—television services, alarm systems, smart home technologies. With so many products to offer in a crowded competitive marketplace and so many potential audiences for those products, finding the perfect way to convey a brand message via a tagline is key to connecting with buyers.



“So we went a different direction, renaming all of our products to what they actually were while reinforcing the overall message of connection, and our ability to provide multiple services, with our tagline.”

CONNECTING WITH CONSUMERS

The best taglines are short but powerful, pointed but not pithy, and memorable without being annoying—think Nike’s “Just Do It” or John Deere’s “Nothing Runs Like a Deere.” Striking the balance between adequate brand representation and impactful messaging can be tough, but HTC (Conway, S.C.) found it in 2010 when the company coined its, “This is life. Connect with it.” tagline as part of an overall rebranding.

Like so many telcos that had risen to the challenge of consumer demand, HTC found itself with several individually-recognizable products and services, but without a well-known unifying brand. Its product brand names were doing well in the competitive markets it served, but consumers were unsure of who HTC was as a company, and often remained oblivious of HTC’s ability to deliver multi-service bundles. This hurt the

company in single-premise penetration in its service areas, as one of its main competitors was Spectrum, a national brand known for bundled services.

“We found our individual product branding was superseding our overall corporate brand,” said Tom Vitt, director of marketing at HTC. “So we went a different direction, renaming all of our products to what they actually were (HTC High-Speed Internet, HTC Digital Cable, etc.) while reinforcing the overall message of connection, and our ability to provide multiple services, with our tagline.”

Prior to the rebranding, the company’s tagline had been “On the line for you. Every day.” But as customers were increasingly unfamiliar with the traditional wireline telephone service model and frequently purchasing services that didn’t always fit the “wired” mental image of a line, it became less relevant as they made buying decisions. Thus, the new tagline was born.

The tagline is deeply tied into the HTC brand, even influencing its online local news portal (called HTC Connect), and the company’s quarterly magazine, “Life Connection.”

“We try not to take it overboard, but work to maintain that ‘connect’ message in everything we do,” said Vitt. “The value of the change is hard to quantify, but it’s made HTC more visible in our markets, and anecdotally the public sentiment has been positive.”

THE CHALLENGE OF CHANGE

Finding a perfect tagline is like locating the proverbial needle in the haystack. Having to change a tagline is a task that can make even the most seasoned marketer cringe. But sometimes the fast-paced and expansionist nature of the telecom industry puts established taglines and the brands they represent on a collision course with change.

DUO Broadband (Jamestown, Ky.) met the challenge to adapt head on after a fiber build expanded its footprint beyond its original service area of Duo County, Ky. Bringing in CLEC customers who wouldn’t be part of the co-op’s membership structure meant the previous Duo County Telecom tagline – “Here to Serve Our Members” – didn’t apply universally to the company’s customer base any longer. It was time for a new tagline.

As a part of the Bluegrass Cellular network, DUO Broadband was familiar with that entity’s tagline, “Your community, expanded.” The idea of “expansion” tied in well with its newly built facilities, and it reinforced the expansiveness of the products and services DUO offered. ▶

DUO Broadband issued several marketing materials to make customers aware of its rebrand and service offerings.

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As a cooperative formed/launched in 1961, membership was a large part of Consolidated's brand, and the tagline, "Owned By Those We Serve," reflected that. The company went through a minor brand and tagline update in the mid-80s, changing its logo and touting themselves as "Your Communications Source."

But it was a strategic market expansion—a purchase of five neighboring exchanges from a competitor in 1996—that sparked the most recent iteration of its tagline. Adding the five new locations, bringing these new members into the cooperative, and putting in place a plan to upgrade the purchased facilities along with their existing exchanges seemed like a good time for a rebrand. The new branding, featuring a Nike-esque swish on the logo, centered on their new tagline, "Reach the World, from here."

"We wanted to stress the local company perspective, but still emphasize our ability to provide services that outpaced our competitors (the former US West, now CenturyLink)," explained Marketing/PR Manager Rhonda Fitterer. "We had the best possible service in our area, and we wanted these new subscribers to know that, while also reminding our existing subscribers. The tagline really drove that home—that no matter what service you subscribe to, Consolidated can help you reach the rest of the world from right here in western North Dakota."

It's a powerful statement, but one that has continued to work for the company as it has rolled out fiber-to-the-home to its entire footprint, beginning in 2006 and extending through the present day.

▶ "When our leadership team, working with a local marketing firm, thought about how broadband expansion helped provide new possibilities to the communities we served, we knew we'd found our new tagline," explained DUO Broadband Director of Marketing Eric West. "We liked it immediately and really didn't consider any other options—'Expand Your Possibilities' just became the new tagline for the new DUO Broadband brand."

DUO Broadband utilized a soft rollout of the new brand and tagline that corresponded to its established marketing and communications plan and channels. The company began using the new tagline and brand in February and March 2019, changing over its website, internet, mobile and radio ads, and email signatures, and sending a bill insert notification to customers. A formal announcement to its members followed in June 2019 at the cooperative's annual meeting.

DOING IT FOR DIFFERENTIATION

The deep roots telcos have in their communities don't translate to immunity from competitive pressures and changing market conditions. To stay competitive, especially across generations, telcos must keep "reintroducing" themselves and their product and service offerings to their audiences.

Despite a largely rural footprint, Consolidated Telecom (Dickinson, N.D.), sees competition from several companies, all of which contribute to its marketplace's evolution. Consolidated's competitors' merger-driven rebrandings have, in some instances, eroded its previous customer base in the confusion of change. Consolidated has strategically rebranded during those market upheavals as well, effectively reintroducing itself and reasserting its capabilities and values to its audience each time.



1961 → 1996

MANAGING THE PROCESS

One thing all companies stressed during the tagline development and rebranding process was securing buy-in from key constituent groups (corporate leadership, governing boards, employees), and communicating to the point of nearly over-communicating.

Vitt explained, "We started off with a series of videos from our corporate leaders, which we trickled out over time to build excitement and suspense. Then we engaged our employees with some surprise pop-up giveaways that featured the new brand and tagline. They'd come into the office on a random Wednesday to find a small pile of newly branded swag on their desks, which was exciting for them, and made them excited about the brand and communicating it to consumers. We also provided all employees with a new brand standards manual that explained the rules for using the brand and the reasoning behind what we were doing, giving them confidence and talking points for customer interactions."

Building a good brand and crafting a tagline that conveys meaning without overstating is a challenge, and one that should not be approached without an abundance of planning, a good rollout strategy and solid support from corporate leadership and staff. Selecting a few choice words and pairing them with a strong brand can say a lot about a company's direction, capabilities and attention to consumer needs. ●

Tara Young is a freelance writer. Contact her at tara.young@gyremarketing.com



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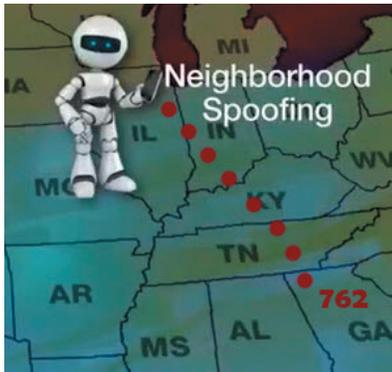
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Can We Stop Robocalls?

Thanks to Congress a problem that has been a plague for years has now hit center stage—how do we deal with nuisance calls?

The American public has had enough, but no one can seem to settle on how to stop these criminals who are now resorting to extortion, threats of arrests, and IRS property confiscations.

STIR/SHAKEN?



Still in beta testing, this network-level technology uses digital certificates, and each telephone service provider obtains digital certificates from a certificate authority who is trusted by other telephone service providers.

The certificate enables the called party to verify that the calling number is accurate and has not been spoofed. The biggest problem with this solution is that it does not support TDM voice traffic, which is still predominant in rural America. Wired Magazine, in an April 2019 article, stated the process of setting up the platform's cryptographic checks and deploying the protocols across every telephony provider in the US is complicated.

PROVEN NETWORK LEVEL SOLUTION—TRUNK GROUP CHALLENGE

Glasford Telephone General Manager Stan Brown had a stack of blank FCC complaint forms in his office that he would regularly give to customers who were getting spoofed by scammers using local numbers from this Glasford Illinois location.

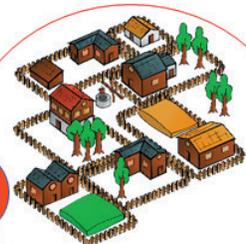
Today those forms are in the paper recycling bin thanks to a feature upgrade on the APMAX TCM Call Screening Service. The service sniffs out calls that appear to be local on a customer's Caller ID but in fact are coming from outside the local exchange territory. Once the call is detected to be from outside the company's network, the Call Screening features of the service kick in to block, challenge, or send the call directly to voicemail without ever ringing the customer's phone. Brown went on to say that once deployed, it was like flipping a switch as the complaints from customers stopped.



Toll TG

605996

605995



STILL STOPPING BAD GUYS TODAY

With the reporting tools built into the service, providers can see that while the calls aren't annoying their customers, the scammers are still on the attack. On April 1 of this year, nearly 300 spoofers tried to sneak into Glasford's local network. This is just one small company, and the data demonstrates just how massive this problem is.

CONSUMER LEVEL CONTROL?

More granular call screening has been available to rural service providers for over fifteen years, allowing consumer control over their incoming calls. Recently Innovative Systems received reports from sixty service providers who have deployed the APMAX Call Screening service at the subscriber level, and the results were stunning! Cumulatively the service interacted with over 19.7 million suspected annoyance calls of which over 11.6 million were likely robocalls, and this is from just sixty providers. Robocalls are the biggest annoyance to the American consumer, and this data shows that over sixty percent of these calls were automatically dropped without ever ringing the customers' phone.

CALL SCREENING FOR ALL YOUR CUSTOMERS?

To keep existing landline customers happy, Albany Mutual Telephone in Minnesota offers free call screening. According

to Albany Office Manager Lisa Groetsch, customers just want a service that will work to stop the solicitation calls, and this service has provided the solution to this problem.

Groetsch adds that having a Telemarketing Block feature is a good response to customers who say, "Why do I want a landline when all I am going to get is telemarketer calls?" As more people are starting to receive these calls on their cellphones, Groetsch says it adds a plus in the landline check box.

Since implementation of this service over 250,000 suspected telemarketer calls have been intercepted at Albany Mutual. Of those calls, 202,000 dropped without responding to the challenge message (likely robocalls), 208,000 calls were blocked because they were in the database of known bad guys, and 64,000 friendly calls (friends, family, known business contacts) pressed 1 to complete the call and were then automatically added to the subscriber's allowed list

A MULTI-PRONG ATTACK IS NECESSARY

The most effective control of nuisance calls should be implemented at both the network and end user levels. If you already have a solution in place, deploy it for all of your customers and create data reports that you can present to advocacy groups and your legislators to prove you are making a good faith effort in reducing the number of annoyance calls to your customers.



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HAPPY ANNIVERSARY

Celebrating Company Landmarks

Successful events require planning, budgeting, teamwork and, in some cases, a tractor-pulled trolley or two.

BY JENNIFER LUBELL

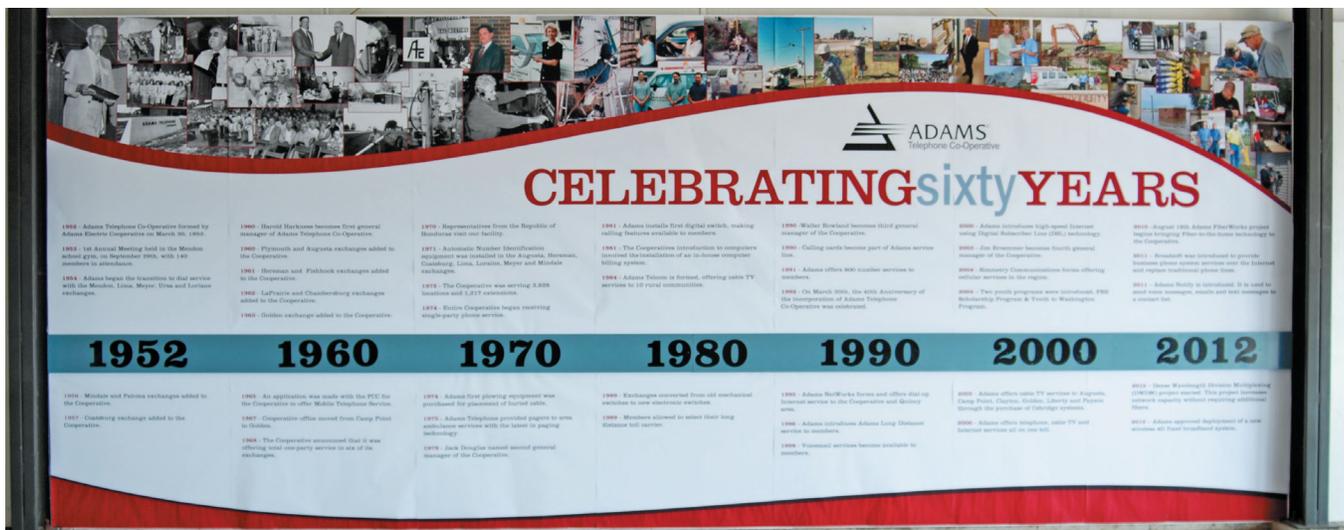
There's nothing like a milestone to bring out the creative juices—and sense of historic pride—in telco companies. To commemorate its 50th anniversary, MoKan Dial, Inc. in St. Louisburg, Kan., held a drawing every Friday for four weeks, offering customers in good standing a \$50 gift certificate. Adams Telephone Cooperative in Golden, Ill., got ambitious during its 60th anniversary, building a 30-by-8-foot historical time display for its annual meeting in 2012.

Companies make full use of social media, newsletters, milestone-themed gifts and prizes and promotional discounts to get the word out about their anniversary and get customers excited. Others have offered scholarships to show support for their communities.

Then there's the piece that ties it all together: the special anniversary logo that appears on everything from banners to merchandise.

No matter what you do, it's always important to plan ahead, budget in advance and schedule your promotions and events accordingly. Know your audience, its demographics, and figure out the specific needs of your audience with respect to transportation, food and entertainment.

Decide what your message is in relation to your anniversary and the theme of your celebration, said Bob Dahlstrom, marketing representative for Valley TeleCom Group (Wilcox, Ariz.), which celebrated its 50th anniversary in 2012.





Once that happens, everything else falls into place, according to Dahlstrom and other telco reps that have gone through this process.

FABULOUS FIFTY

The 50-year mark is a popular landmark to celebrate. Several telcos have taken on this milestone with gusto, tailoring merchandise, food, logos and entertainment around this theme. For its 50th anniversary, Valley TeleCom Group, which offers high-speed internet and digital phone for home and businesses as well as hosted IP PBX services for businesses, placed a spotlight on the cooperative's long history and its importance in the local community.

Seeking ideas from the entire company, "we tried to make it a monumental event and kept focusing on giving back to our members and customers," Dahlstrom said. Pivot, a customer engagement agency, worked with Valley TeleCom to create a special anniversary logo, which it promoted throughout the year to signify this important anniversary.

"We wanted to let people know we've been here for a long time," Dahlstrom said. Thus, the telco made every effort to play up the number commemorating its half-century mark. Everything the company did—and gave away—centered around the number 50.

Valley TeleCom created a company timeline of historic milestones on double retractable banners, then prominently displayed the banners in all four of its offices. It also offered free, limited edition 50th anniversary souvenirs to customers who visited the Valley TeleCom offices. Each quarter of 2012 featured a different item. In the first quarter it was pocket calendars/ appointment books, followed by 50th anniversary-themed gold foil chocolate coins, Valley hand-held fans adorned with its logo, and exclusive gold Valley TeleCom-branded Christmas tree ornaments in the succeeding quarters.

Interstate Telecommunications Cooperative, Inc. (ITC; Clear Lake, S.D.) capitalized on the mood and themes of the 1950s era when it celebrated its half-century anniversary back in 2004. ITC serves more than 12,500 customers across 4,200 square miles in northeastern South Dakota and southwestern Minnesota, offering broadband, phone, digital TV, home and business monitoring. ITC plans to be 100% fiber-built by the year 2020.

ITC created a special logo for its celebration, aptly titled "Fabulous 50s." The logo appeared on all material, clothing and other promotional items for the entire 50th year. It was designed in-house, which saved on the budget.

"The date for our 50th celebration was our annual meeting [that] took place

at a school in Clear Lake," recalled marketing supervisor Kathy Weitala. The company set up tents, booked a 1950s band, and served a beef and chicken dinner. It also took steps to provide accessible transportation and appeal to families with children.

ITC's general manager guided participants through the company's 50 years of service in a PowerPoint presentation, highlighting its history and accomplishments. "To get more families [to attend the event], we hired a kid's entertainer, served a kid's meal and had a drawing for a boy's and girl's bike. After our meeting, the band played and people were encouraged to dance and enjoy," Weitala said. Three tractor-pulled trolleys picked up attendees from various parking spots around town.

The company also gave away Red Wing crock pots to its members, and logo-embled golf shirts for employees and board members.

Through its monthly newsletters, ITC kept the celebration going all year long, publishing articles on its 50 years of service. "We also discussed what life was like 50 years ago. Bread cost 15 cents. Average salary was under \$3,000. Prime time TV was 'I Love Lucy' and 'Gunsmoke'," Weitala said. ▶



▶ MULTIPLE ANNIVERSARIES



CASSCOMM in Virginia, Ill., has had several landmark anniversaries worth celebrating. It began its first telephone service in 1898 as Cass Telephone Co., eventually franchising out as Virginia and Little Indian Telephone Company. "The telephone wire ran from the community of Little Indian to Virginia, providing telephone service within the city limits. The construction wires were strung along roadsides, attached to any stable device available," according to Casey French, the company's director of marketing and public relations.



Casey French, director of marketing and public relations, CASSCOMM

The telephone, cable and internet provider now has more than 1,600 landline phones and 2,000 digital phones, serving 15,000 total home subscribers. Cass Cable TV, Inc. offers more than 200 high-definition (HD) channels, serving 9,000 customers in 32 communities in central Illinois, said French. "It also provides high-speed internet services to more than 32 communities and has an internet subscriber count of 13,000. It just

started upgrading its full plant to fiber-to-the-home capability, offering residents speeds of up to 1 Gig."

One of its first customer appreciation events took place in 1998 at its new office headquarters to commemorate 100 years of telephone service, French recalled. "We had a circus ... come to town. We invited all of our landline customers, which at that time was over 4,500 customers."

In 2015, its cable service hit 50 years. "For this milestone, we did a promotion offering \$50 a month for cable services," French said. Employees received winter coats with CASSCOMM's "50 years" logo embroidered on them. In 2016, the company celebrated 20 years of internet. "For this milestone, we gave all the employees a nice burlap tote bag with '20 years of internet' on it," he added.

A COMPANYWIDE EFFORT

Telcos that have planned these events say it's crucial to involve all sectors of the company, and to establish a budget in advance.

It helps to delegate and break things down, they said. Weitala, who coordinated ITC's 50th anniversary celebration, first determined key subject areas with her colleagues, "and then subcommittees developed from there." The general manager sought out employees interested in the company's history and appointed people to entertainment, history, food and public relations subcommittees. "Each of those groups had their own tasks to do," Weitala said. Many of ITC's 54 employees, including staff and management, worked on the project.

You have to think about big ticket items first, advised Weitala, whose board of directors approved a budget. "We knew that once we subtracted the dollars out for entertainment and food, we'd have more flexibility for other things."

Valley TeleCom broke things down by quarters in 2012, which made it easier to come up with a budget. "We did get an increase in our marketing budget for the following year because we'd already organized what we wanted to do," said Dahlstrom. "This is a good reason to plan ahead, a year in advance if possible. Ask yourselves: How much in next year's budget can we set aside? And why do we need this money?"



Bob Dahlstrom, marketing representative, Valley Telecom

Valley TeleCom enlisted the help of an outside graphics company to design its logo. Other companies worked with internal staff to keep costs down. "We were lucky to have graphics people in our marketing department to help design our logo. It takes time but reduces costs," said Weitala.

COMMUNITY CONNECTIONS

Looking at things in retrospect, there's always room for improvement. Valley TeleCom fully leveraged its website, community events, bill messages and monthly e-newsletter to keep customers informed of anniversary activities. Annually, it gives scholarships to eligible students who are members or the children of members of its cooperative, funded through unclaimed capital credits. "During our 50th year celebration, we awarded a total of \$85,000 in scholarships to 37 students. That number has significantly increased since then," Dahlstrom said.

Nevertheless, he wishes the company would have done more boots-on-the-ground work in the local communities, educating people about Valley TeleCom's work in starting telephone services in very rural areas over the last 50 years.

"Those communities didn't have phones in 1962. And that's why the cooperative was formed. It's owned by members and has become a part of the fabric of those communities. I think we could have done a better job of explaining all of that."

NEVER TOO EARLY TO BEGIN A PLAN

Any telco with a major milestone celebration under its belt will tell you that timing is everything in planning these events. Although it wasn't specific to an anniversary, French remembered one time when a back-to-school promotion didn't go as successfully as planned. "We started it too late, in August." You learn from your mistakes, he said. For this reason, it's always a good idea to think ahead, and time your promotions in the most optimal way.

It's also never too early to start formulating a plan, said Dahlstrom. His company's 60th anniversary is coming up in three years and people are already getting ideas down on paper.

Start having conversations—not just about how to celebrate your telco, but how to celebrate your members. For the next anniversary, Valley TeleCom is hoping to do more work within its service territory. "The plan is to celebrate the 60th in our communities," Dahlstrom said. ●

Jennifer Lubell is a freelance writer. Contact her at jenniferlubell@gmail.com.

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Navigating Generational Differences in the Workplace

A Q&A With Ben Eubanks

By Dennis McGarry



We recently sat down with Ben Eubanks, an HR industry analyst with Lighthouse Research in Alabama, to talk about generations in the workplace and what a maze it is for managers to often have multiple generations working side by side. Ben, a speaker at NTCA's Telecom Executive Forum, will be presenting at NTCA's HR + Benefits Conference in Myrtle Beach this August.

In a recent session, I heard you talking about generational differences in the workplace, how would you categorize each of the generations that are out there today?

For the foreseeable future, organizations will have four generations in the workforce: from older to younger, we're talking about baby boomers; Gen Xers; millennials; and Gen Zers. Clearly, a one-size-fits-all approach to employee engagement and benefits will not cut it for this diverse team.

While we talk about generations like they are static, the truth is that workers all pass through various life stages. Millennials are at the early stage of career progression, meaning they change jobs more frequently than other groups. That doesn't mean they are "job hoppers," just that they are in that time of life where they are rapidly progressing through early roles. Gen X and boomers did the same thing when they were in their 20s and 30s.

It helps to define certain conversations like the one we're having today by naming certain generations, but it's also important to remember that there is diversity within each generation as well in terms of preferences and priorities.

Can you outline the current generations and the values that a manager should understand?

Sure, and it's a varied team for certain. Many baby boomers are delaying retirement, which may put pressure on subsequent generations for senior level positions and key leadership roles. Members of this group have an immense amount of knowledge and skills and are looking for a way to share them before they ultimately retire. Instead of coasting into retirement, they are looking for ways to stay actively involved and engaged, even if only on a part-time basis.

Generation X workers are sandwiched between a large population of baby boomers and an even larger population of millennials. This group is starting to focus on future-oriented areas like retirement, but at the same time many are climbing the career ladder and looking for ways to continue advancing as baby boomers make their exit from the workforce. Coaching and leadership development are critical for these individuals.

Then comes millennials—according to the ADP Research Institute® report, "Strategic Drift: How HR Plans for Change," millennials are looking for opportunities to learn, grow and advance their careers. One organization cited in the report says that millennials' reputation for changing jobs often



reflects the failure of organizations to train them—not the picture of disloyalty often painted in the media. This group is ready to advance, which presents a winning combination for baby boomers looking to share their years of wisdom with an eager audience.

And finally, Gen Z is just entering the workplace. The Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) notes, “With Gen Z coming of age during the recession, they are putting money and job security at the top of the list. Sure, they want to make a difference, but surviving and thriving are more important. The cultures that can foster that are the ones that will win the war for talent with Gen Z.” It’s important to see this in the context of the other demographic groups to understand how best to motivate these workers.

So what’s the bottom line? How do we meet the needs of a diverse workforce?

The lesson for leaders is to keep these varying interests in mind when considering areas of investment on the employee side of the equation. For instance, mentorship and career development programs could be a pro for millennials, but it takes the involvement of baby boomers and other experienced workers to make the relationships work.

What do you see as the ROI for employee engagement?

While it’s nice to consider the prospect of increasing employee engagement just for the sake of it, the truth is there needs to be business value tied to the practice. Forbes reports that in hospitals, teams with more engaged employees lead to fewer readmissions, increasing patient satisfaction scores. This is one example, but research shows a wide variety of positive impacts from engaged employees: employee retention, customer satisfaction, work quality, productivity, and even revenue and profitability.



“It’s not just about dollars spent—it’s about loyalty, satisfaction and engagement that result when individuals feel like their employer truly cares about them. The value of creating the kind of environment where employees feel appreciated is a trade-off in increased performance, effort and quality.”

It’s important to note that while each organization may be different, there is always value in creating a positive, engaging workplace for employees.

While there may be some generational differences in workplace preferences, most people want to learn, grow, use their strengths, and be recognized and appreciated for their efforts. Leaders that can invest in programs that support these things will likely see the value that an engaged workforce can deliver to the bottom line.

It’s not just about dollars spent—it’s about loyalty, satisfaction and engagement that result when individuals feel like their employer truly cares about them. The value of creating the kind of environment where employees feel appreciated is a trade-off in increased performance, effort and quality. ●

Dennis McGarry is director of programming at NTCA—The Rural Broadband Association. Contact him at dmcgarry@ntca.org.



“Mentorship and career development programs could be a pro for millennials, but it takes the involvement of baby boomers and other experienced workers to make the relationships work.”



● #THROWBACK ●

A Legacy of Expertise and Commitment

Longtime NTCA Members Look Back on the Industry Upon the Association's 65th Anniversary.

By Ashley Spinks

For NTCA member companies, providing cutting-edge telecommunications services to rural communities is often a family affair. As NTCA celebrates its 65th anniversary and looks back on the history of the industry, it's worth remembering that for many small, rural telcos throughout the country, company legacy is synonymous with family legacy.

KEEPING IT IN THE FAMILY

Orlean Smith is the general manager of Canadian Valley Telephone (Crowder, OK), and he's a third-generation operator. His grandfather bought the Canadian, Okla., exchange in 1927; he was a rancher and farmer who decided he needed telephone service to do business. A couple years later, the Great Depression hit the area hard—particularly the town of Crowder, three miles south. According to Smith, “[The Bell Telephone Co.] was going to sell their exchanges and pull out—my grandfather bought the Crowder exchange, intending to use it for parts to keep his own system running.” Before he could get the equipment out, Smith said, “Someone called him on the phone”—a sign that Canadian Valley had a broader community to serve in Oklahoma.

Thus began the story of Canadian Valley, a story that runs parallel to Smith family history. Smith's two aunts and grandmother were the telephone company's original switchboard operators. Every summer, Smith joined his parents in working at the company, he said.

“By 1980, I was old enough to work. I installed cable TV [and] plowed in cable ... until my senior year of college. Every summer I'd come home,” Smith said. He didn't know immediately that he was destined to carry on the family tradition of telco operation. Smith went to college at the University of Oklahoma, got a job at Wrangler's Menswear and managed a production facility, all in hopes of learning how to successfully run a business, he explained.

In 1992, he said, he got a call from his father with a clear message: “If you

want to run a phone company, you better get over here and get to doing it.” Smith took the reins, and he said the continuation of his grandfather's business is, in hindsight, perhaps the accomplishment he's proudest of. “There's not very many companies left that have third-generation operators,” he said. “There's a zillion stories out there of grandma and grandpa starting the phone company, but they've been sold or bought out by bigger companies. Yeah, I'm proud of that.”

For Mike Oblizalo, vice president and general manager of Hood Canal Communications (Union, Wash.), that feeling of pride is likely familiar. Hood Canal is also a family-owned telco, and Oblizalo has been in the industry since he was 16, he said, working alongside his grandfather. His grandfather—who already owned the local hardware store, marina and acted as the town

The main office of Canadian Valley in Oklahoma.





Hood Canal employees play a large role in the community.



mechanic at the time—purchased the telephone company in 1956.

“I used to ride around with him when I was a kid. ... I’ve been going to customers’ homes and doing repairs on phone lines since I was an eight-year-old,” Oblizalo said. In addition to being family- and community-oriented, Oblizalo described the company as versatile and nimble—and perhaps counter-intuitively, attributes its staying power to its relatively small size. When he started, the company had only six employees, so each staff member had a variety of skills—“everyone did everything,” he said. When the company started out, “we used to wear so many hats. You started [a project] at the beginning and saw it through to the end,” Oblizalo explained.

But even as the company has grown—it now has 41 employees—it has remained like a family, Oblizalo said. “We’ve become busier and more specialized in what we do. But it’s been instilled in our organization from my grandfather having the company—that pride and ownership. We know our community is very special,” he said.

RURAL TELCOS HAVE STAYING POWER

Hood Canal is progressive—it started offering broadband in 2000, Oblizalo said, because “being a small company and being a little bit more nimble” (and having a wealth of experience and institutional knowledge, surely) allowed the company to experiment with cutting-edge and emerging

technologies. Chris Phillips, general manager of Kalida Telephone Co. (Kalida, Ohio), has been with the company since 1976, and credited its small size with its spirit of collaboration.

“We have nine employees. We wear multiple hats, and if guys get behind, I’ll go out and help, bury a fiber optic line. ... it’s always been that way,” he said. “That’s what made the job fun for so many years—one day you might be out burying cable, the next day you’re working on the building itself.”

Small companies stick together. Phillips spoke highly of his peer rural telecom companies in Ohio. He said that in the past, often due to bad weather or some other obstacle, “We’ve helped out neighboring companies. There’s a really good working relationship between small companies. That’s why [we’ve] been able to survive.” In addition to taking care of each other, each rural telco takes seriously its responsibility to its employees. Longtime employees and executives of NTCA member companies share a sense of obligation and concern for the communities in which they do business—oftentimes, they said, they’re the largest employer in town, and they feel a responsibility to treat their friends and neighbors with respect and fairness.

“I’m proud to serve the community,” Oblizalo said. “I feel fortunate to the company for taking care of its employees, that’s been huge for the family life in a rural area. We have good, quality, living-wage jobs ... and that dedication to my community has just been instilled in me.”

Jason Smith, general manager of Rainbow Communications (Everest, Kan.), knows from personal experience that rural telcos, with the help of the NTCA benefits program, set their employees up for success and

▶ financial security—which can have an immense impact on small-town families. “I grew up in a farm family in the late ’70s and early ’80s, and it was tough,” Smith said. “We didn’t have much [and] retirement really wasn’t something that you thought about, because you had to survive today. That’s just the way the farm economy was at the time—it’s one of the pressures of rural America.”

But thanks to NTCA’s Savings Plan, as well as his own diligence in contributing over the years, Smith says he’s well-prepared to have a comfortable retirement. “That’s going to allow me to do some other things, and possibly provide a legacy for my children,” Smith said.

CONSTANT CHANGE, CONSISTENT VALUES

Smith, like so many other members and employees of the rural broadband providers in NTCA’s membership, has dedicated decades to his community and the industry. A lot has changed in the 65 years since NTCA was founded. The first wireless “auction” Orlean Smith can remember occurred in 1989—and was conducted by assigning participating



A historical photo of network operations at Rainbow Communications.

companies numbers on ping pong balls. “If your ball got drawn, you got your license,” Smith said. Even then, the small companies had each other’s backs. Smith explained: “Six telcos made an agreement that we’d go all for one, one for all ... so [together] we built the first wireless network in our area, probably 80 square miles.”

The consensus today is that broadband is the future—because it’s what’s next in a long tradition of providing the best telecommunications services possible, and because rural communities can’t survive without it. Hood Canal has gone to extraordinary lengths—securing both Rural Utilities Service Community Connect grants and other USDA grants—to expand its

service territory and to bring high-speed internet to the Squaxin Island reservation. “We already had been doing their phone system for them, and it was one of our first FTTH projects,” Oblizalo said. “There weren’t outside plant products ... the electronics were still new, but we did it. And still to this day we use that infrastructure.”

Jason Smith summed it up: “We’re a broadband company now, that’s who we are. That’s where we’re going to keep plowing toward.”

Although the technology has changed, the culture has stayed the same. “The culture of our business is the same today as it was 50 years ago or 80 years ago,” Orlean Smith said. “We put service above all else.” His grandfather was inspired from the beginning, he said, by a simple mantra: “We’re just trying to make a phone operate so that people in the community can have a phone.” ●

Ashley Spinks is communications coordinator at NTCA. Contact her at aspinks@ntca.org.

IN THE NEXT ISSUE

- **Where is the Rural Telco Workforce “Coming From?”**
- **Rural News: Not Black and White**
- **The Power of a Common Place and Voice for Rural Economic Development**

To submit article ideas, send proposals to the editor at publications@ntca.org.

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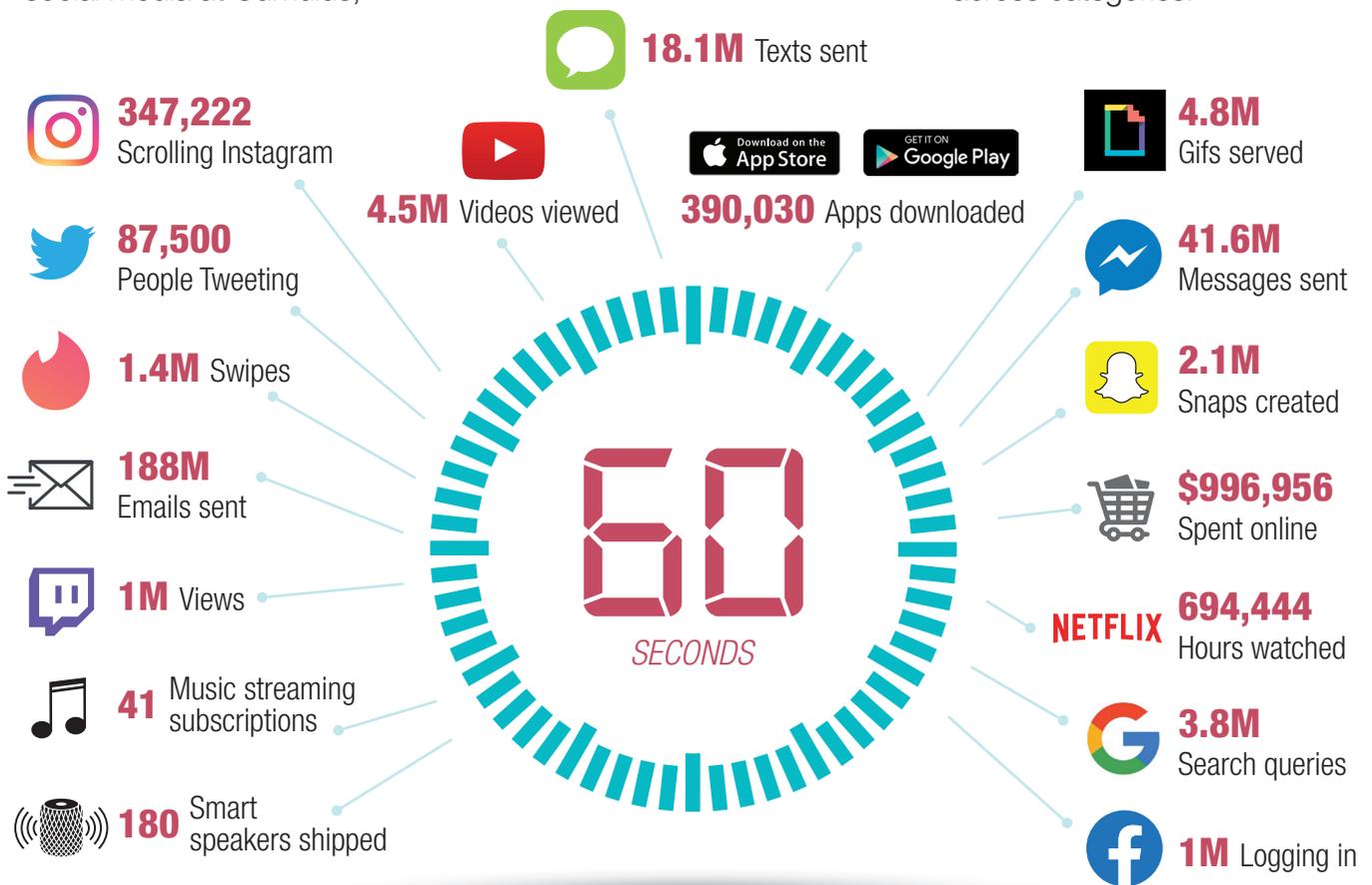
An 'Internet Minute' Gets an Update

By Christian Hamaker

In May of 2018, NTCA's Ashley Spinks wrote about "what happens in an internet minute." An infographic from Lori Lewis, vice president of social media at Cumulus,

showed how many minutes per hour internet users devote to Netflix, social media and email, among several other online options.

Lewis has now updated the chart for 2019, and the differences between 2018 and 2019 are striking, with far more increases than decreases across categories.



UP

- Netflix use, which has exploded.
- The number of daily active Facebook users.
- Online spending.
- Text messages sent.
- Videos viewed on YouTube.

- Apps Downloaded.
- Google searches.
- Twitch views.
- Scrolling Instagram.
- Emails sent.

DOWN

Snaps created—with a caveat: "While Snapchat lost users after its botched redesign early 2018, people watching Snaps-exclusive stories and shows is on the rise," Lewis wrote.

Source: allaccess.com

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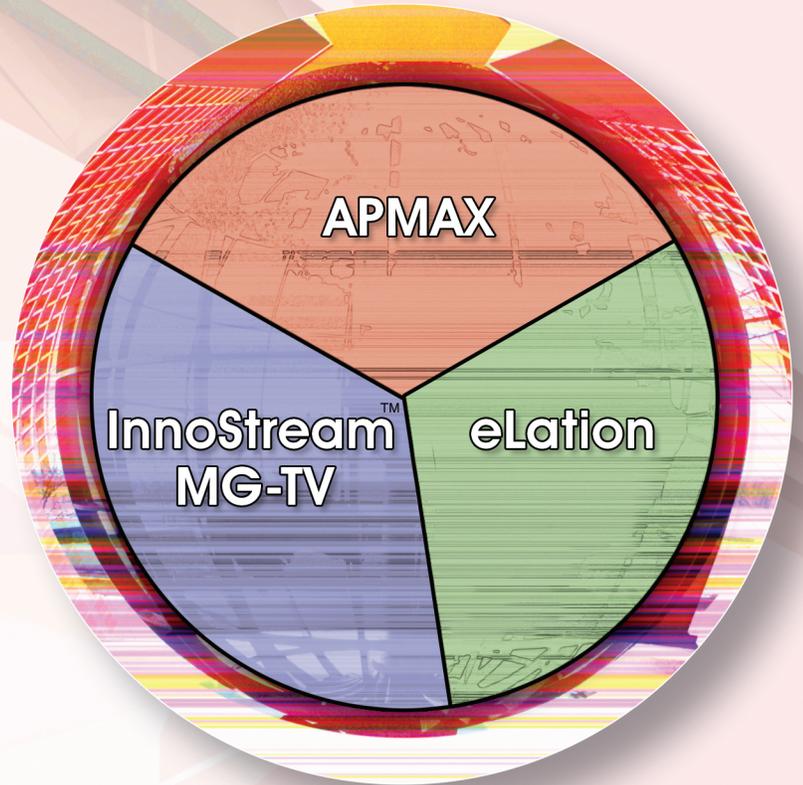
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