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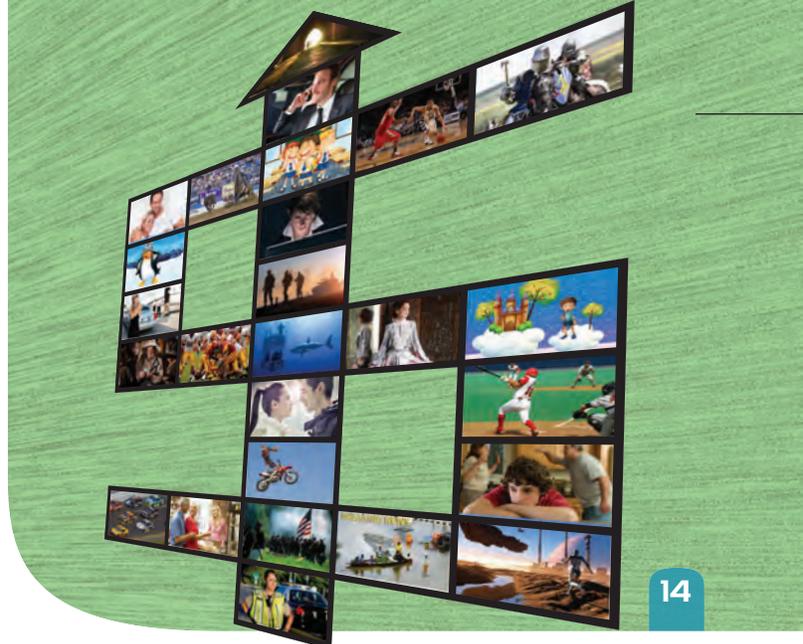
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Every time a video provider renegotiates a contract with a content provider, content prices go up—at dizzying speed the past few years. Many telcos now find that they have no choice but to raise video subscription rates—and face the heat. How can you help prepare customers for higher bills?

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Website address: www.ntca.org

Publisher:

NTCA—The Rural Broadband Association

Chief Executive Officer:

Shirley Bloomfield, sbloomfield@ntca.org

Director of Communications:

Laura Withers, lwithers@ntca.org

Editor:

Christian Hamaker, chamaker@ntca.org

Senior Writer/Editor:

Tennille Shields, tshields@ntca.org

Advertising:

sales@ntca.org

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NTCA represents nearly 900 small, rural, locally owned and operated telephone cooperatives and commercial 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 telephone 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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>>

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The Editorial Purpose of Rural Telecom is threefold: to inform readers of public policy issues affecting the industry; to provide insight on developing businesses and technology; and to share expertise and experience on management, marketing and customer service.

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Old vs. New: Why Not Both?

The world of marketing is changing. For some, it can't change fast enough. Why wait for the mailman when email is instant? Why spend money upgrading your website when there are low-cost blogging platforms that give you almost as many options? Why do TV commercials when your customers are willing to brag about your company on Facebook for free?



For rural telcos, the transition to digital and social marketing has been more gradual. As longtime Rural Telecom contributor Rachel Brown observes in "The Power and Place of Traditional Marketing," traditional marketing tactics (defined as everything from TV commercials to radio ads, direct mailings and bill inserts) still make up most of rural telcos' marketing budgets—presumably because as the industry considers the return on investment of new media, many have found that social marketing is not necessarily a replacement for good, old-fashioned broadcasting. In the battle of old versus new, old school seems to be winning the day.

But why, I ask, must we pick one or the other? Why not have both? In this issue, you'll read about how rural telecom providers have merged the two—social and traditional—to amplify their messages and reach diverse audiences. At a time when new services are being rolled out at a rapid clip and results are needed right away, it's hard to gamble all of your resources on anything less than tried and true. But when marketing dollars are scarce, online platforms can provide a free or low-cost alternative to expensive ad buys.

The key is finding your own special brew. Have a taste of what your colleagues have tested and decide what's best for you.

Laura Withers
Director of Communications
lwithers@ntca.org

A 'Little Way' to Go in Knowing Your Audience

Marketing products and services is challenging enough when you know your audience, but what happens when there's a disconnect? A lesson from the publishing world shows the pitfalls of pressing ahead despite warning signs that your marketing may need to be retooled.



In early 2013, blogger and author Rod Dreher published "The Little Way of Ruthie Leming," a memoir recounting how he fled the rural town in which he grew up to pursue the life of a journalist in the big city.

But his story doesn't end there. When his sister, Ruthie, became ill, he discovered that the life he had wanted to escape was now a draw, leading him back to rural America. "The Little Way of Ruthie Leming" is an honest, lovely book—one that doesn't romanticize rural life but shows its great appeal.

However, that appeal was not as widespread as the author had hoped it would be. A month after the book's release, Dreher asked on his blog why Christian media in particular weren't covering the book. He wrote that he'd been warned by friends that some episodes in his

book might be seen as "theologically incorrect," but he didn't raise those concerns until the marketing plan was well underway.

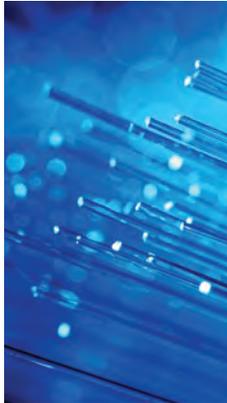
When you don't understand certain fundamentals about what your customers think, you're setting yourself up for disappointment. That lesson applies to telcos, too. Have you ever offered your customers something you thought had value, only to discover demand wasn't there? As you read through this issue of the magazine, with its focus on marketing, ask yourself how well you know the customers you've served for so many years, and how you can attract new subscribers. Doing as much audience analysis as you can before launching a new product—and not being afraid to make adjustments based on customer response—will go a long way toward achieving success.

What, if anything, have you been overlooking?

Christian Hamaker
Editor, Rural Telecom
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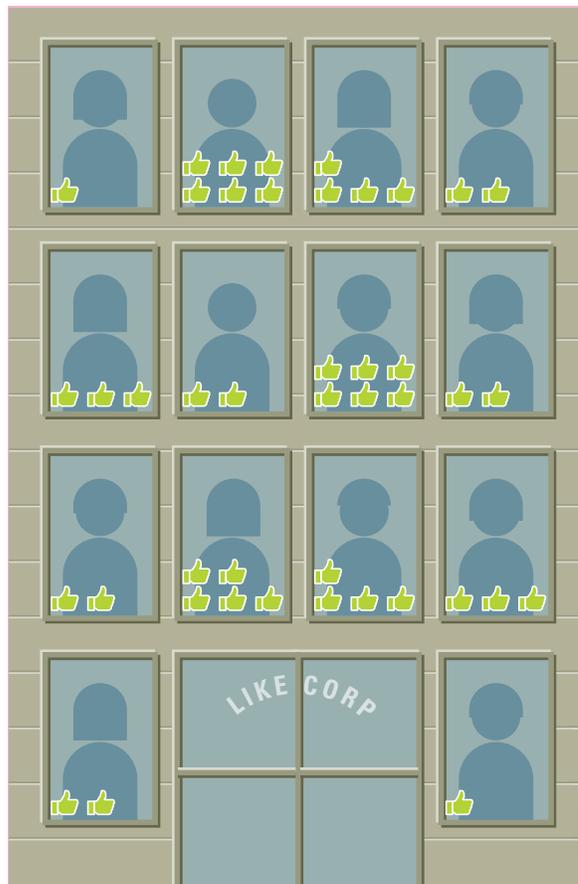
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I N T E G R I T Y I N T O E V E R Y T H I N G

Why Likeability in the Workplace Is More Important Than Ever



Sure, work performance matters to employers, but increasingly, so does likeability.

"Likeable people are more apt to be hired, get help at work, get useful information from others and have mistakes forgiven," wrote Sue Shellenbarger.

The shift is attributable in large part to an increase in videoconferencing—where likeability is more important but also more difficult to put across than in person—and to social networking, which employers track to measure how users spread information and influence change.

If you've been told you're lacking in the likeability department, take heart: "Likeability isn't something you are born with, like charisma," said trainer and consultant Ben Decker. "It's something you can learn."

►Source: wsj.com

The Top 5 Overused Words in Press Releases

An analysis by Shift Communications of 62,768 press releases published on Marketwire.com in 2013 showed that the most overused words were:

NEW (110,059 times)

FIRST (56,724 times)

MOBILE (28,534 times)

PROFESSIONAL (27,859 times)

MOST (25,774 times)

►Source: marketingprofs.com

College Grads' Regret? Lack of Work Experience

How is your telco reaching out to college students and recent graduates?

Asked what their biggest regret about college was, half of all college graduates responding to a recent Pew survey indicated they wished they had gained more work experience while in school.

That response topped "choosing a different major" (29%), which is often thought to be the lament of liberal-arts majors. Indeed, "choosing a different major" could only muster a fourth-place finish, behind "studying harder" (38%) and "looking for work sooner" (30%).

►Source: pewsocialtrends.org



Will Rural Call Centers Supplant Big-Box Retail?

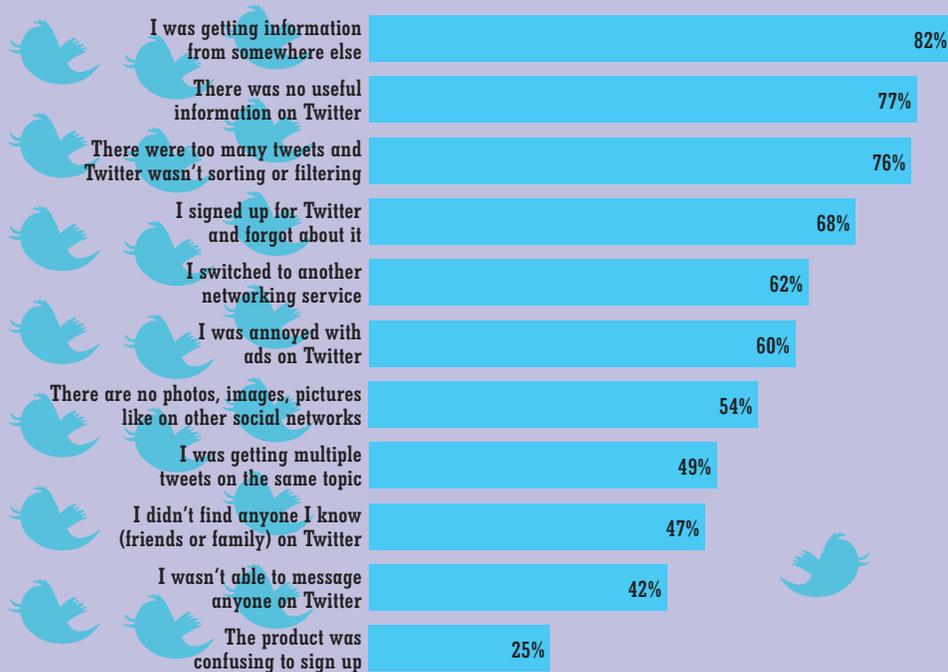


Retail broadly is undergoing a change, with store footprints shrinking because of streamlined inventories and more online shopping. But brick-and-mortar retailers in rural America are seeing a different future than are retailers in metropolitan areas.

Michael Burden, a principal with Excess Space Retail Services, said "big box" stores will evolve in the coming decade, as "smaller boxes" become more prevalent. Some of the old big-box space could be repurposed for Amazon or Wal-Mart, but that's less likely for rural areas, which are at risk of becoming "ghost boxes," Burden said.

"The more rural it is, the less likely there is a need or the ability for a single tenant to come in and utilize the space," he said. "In those markets in particular, you're going to be looking at churches, bingo places, flea markets, medical uses, call centers."

►Source: npr.org



A Simple Solution for Twitter Quitters

Why do people abandon Twitter? The reasons are many, but “in short, it comes down to not knowing who to follow and not having enough followers,” wrote John McDuling, referencing findings from a Deutsche Bank survey of 1,100 people, including lapsed and current Twitter users.

The main problem, according to Deutsche, is one of curation, which explains why survey respondents, asked what might bring them back to Twitter, cited “better sorting and filtering tools with less clutter” as their most popular response.

►Source: qz.com

Is Social Media Fueling a Ratings Rise for TV Awards Shows?

Telcos offering video are benefiting from higher audiences for major awards shows. But what’s fueling the uptick?

One theory: social media.

The Oscars have ridden an upward trend in viewership in recent years, and ABC has noted that Twitter activity related to the broadcast was up 75% in 2014 over a year ago. Social Guide estimated 3 million people sent 11.2 million Oscar-related tweets this year.

Emily Yahr—noting that the Golden Globes have seen steady ratings increases in recent years and that the Emmy awards hit a 10-year high in viewership in 2013—asked, “Is social media the reason that awards shows have been spiking in the ratings? It certainly makes sense.”

►Source: washingtonpost.com

For Local Appeal, Look to Regional Magazines

If you’re thinking about where to invest advertising resources, look to regional magazines over “hyperlocal” websites.

Measured by the fates of hyperlocal news sites like Patch, Citysearch and Sidewalk, the hyperlocal experiment for online news hasn’t worked out. Local advertisers never warmed to the sites, and readers were too few to sustain heavy ongoing investment in the projects.

But local magazines like Portland Monthly and Rhode Island Monthly are succeeding where hyperlocal sites have failed. “Local markets need individual, customized management—each one is different,” wrote Michael Rondon.

As for online opportunities, advertisers can find those through local and regional publications, too. “Print is still the largest revenue driver for city and regional magazines, but their multiplatform content can still be considered an advantage over hyperlocal digital competition,” according to Rondon’s article.

►Source: foliomag.com



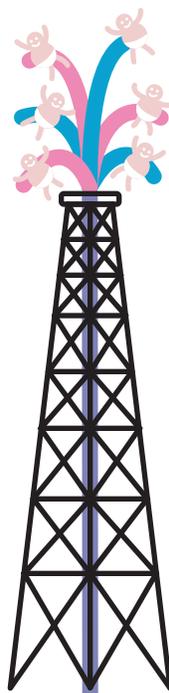
Oil and Natural Gas Boom Leads to Baby Boom

U.S. Census Bureau estimates for 2013 show that while the United States saw the fewest number of births since 1998, areas where oil and natural gas exploration have taken off are bucking the trend.

“The largest metropolitan areas are getting bigger as much of the rest of the nation sees slower population growth or declines,” wrote John McCormick. “Rural areas where oil and natural gas production is booming and Gulf Coast retirement conclaves are notable exceptions to that trend.”

“Rising fertility rates in states such as South Dakota, where unemployment is 3.6%, have prompted some demographers and economists to predict a reversal of the nationwide decline in fertility that coincided with the recession and its aftermath.”

►Source: chicagotribune.com



A Victory for NTCA Benefits

Over the past several years, NTCA—The Rural Broadband Association members and other small, rural providers have endured mounting uncertainty on a variety of regulatory issues affecting your businesses. But, the tides are changing, with some important incremental wins on the policy front. With all of the uncertainty facing our industry, it's especially important to celebrate those victories when they happen.

On April 7, President Barack Obama signed the Cooperative and Small Employer Charity Pension Flexibility Act of 2014 into law. The bipartisan legislation, backed unanimously by both houses of Congress, secures permanent relief for multiple-employer retirement plans like NTCA's Retirement & Security (R&S) Program from certain funding requirements of the Pension Protection Act of 2006.

NTCA's policy team and R&S trustees have been advocating for this change on behalf of our members and more than 17,500 participants in the program for several years. The success of the legislation is not only a testament to the importance of "staying at it" and building like-minded coalitions, but also a sign that when given the right information, members of Congress understand the unique circumstances facing rural and small businesses—and will act in a bipartisan way to support them.

It's a big success, but it's just a piece of the puzzle that NTCA is working on to control costs associated with our benefits program. Over the past three years, the trust committees overseeing the program have done an exceptional job introducing almost 70 amendments to the benefit plans, and many were made to contain costs and increase flexibility for members. Amendments have expanded preventive care benefits, and added a lower-cost long-term disability plan and additional waiver-of-contribution options to the Group Health Program (GHP). GHP is also now partnering with UnitedHealthcare to provide one national preferred provider organization network, giving participants access to more in-network health care providers and lower-cost services. GHP also offers supplemental life coverage for participant employees and their spouses, and increased flexibility so retirees can reduce life coverage elections annually. The changes also included launch of a Medicare Part D prescription drug plan.

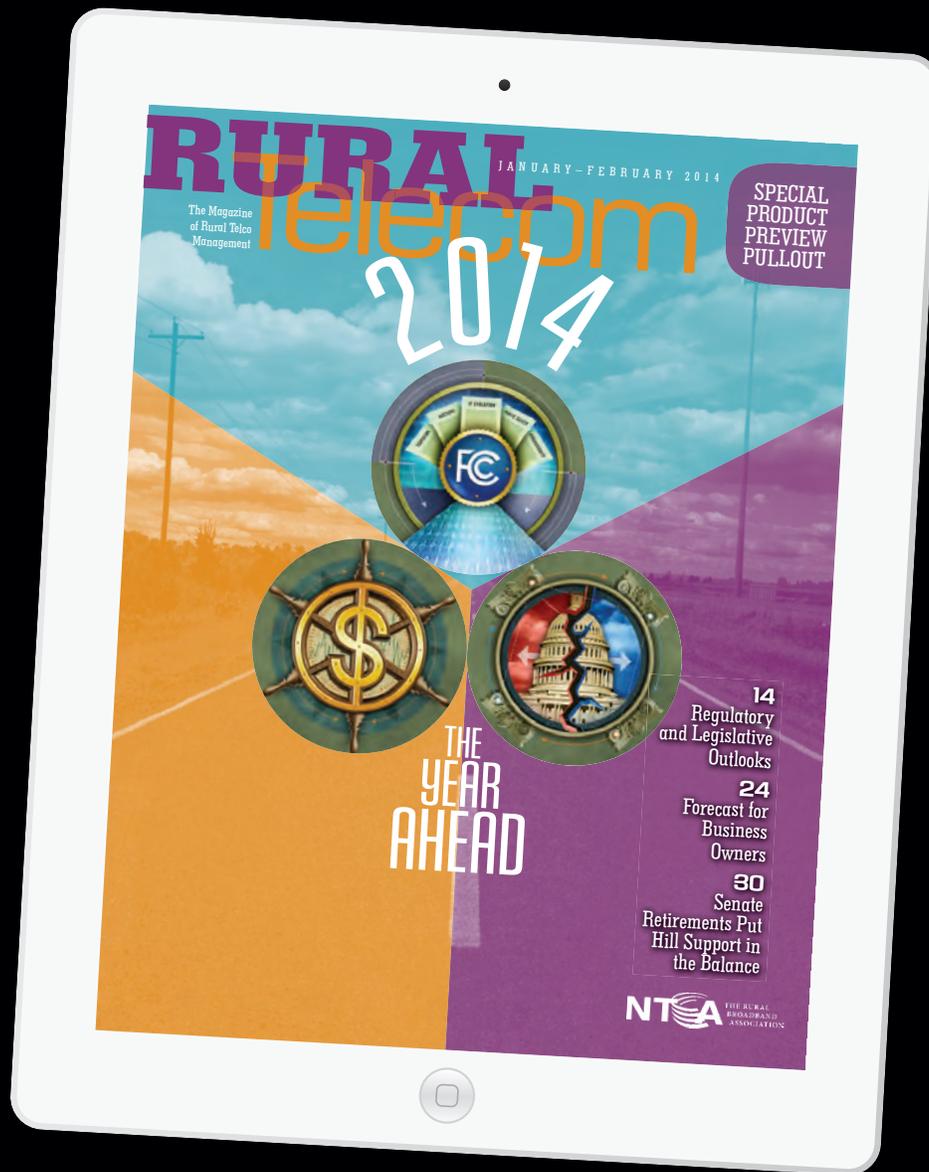


In addition to our terrific advocacy work on the R&S Plan, the program's trust committee has implemented changes to reduce the minimum allowable benefit formula, added options for employee-required contributions and eliminated requirements for mandatory funding of benefits for employees subject to a two-year or minimum-age-21 eligibility period. Changes have also been made to keep costs down within the Savings Plan, with over 18,150 participants. Investment funds have been replaced with lower-cost options, using institutional share class funds. Participant account fees stayed at the same level for the most recent three-year period and were reduced for 2014.

The recent pension legislation will allow the R&S Program to continue to provide retirement benefits without being subject to rules that would require hundreds of millions of dollars in unwarranted increased pension costs and impede your companies from continuing to offer this valuable benefit and great retention tool to your employees. Through the daily work of our trust committees, policy and benefits administration team, and member relations managers, we allow participants in all of our benefit plans to focus on what you do best: provide high-quality services to consumers in rural America. ■

Shirley Bloomfield is chief executive officer of NTCA—The Rural Broadband Association. She can be reached at sbloomfield@ntca.org.

WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW, AS YOU NEED TO KNOW IT.



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Why Offer Less Than the Best?

I was at a marketing conference last year in a small breakout session focused on “ways to upsell” and overheard a marketing manager talking about how well she knew her customer base. So well, in fact, that she told a story of talking a customer out of getting a higher tiered broadband service because she knew the lady lived alone and “didn’t need all that bandwidth” anyway.

Hashtag major fail.

That is an extreme example of missing the mark in selling tiered broadband service. But could it be possible that more rational selling methods are just as backward?

Our company, Big Bend Telephone Co. (Alpine, Texas), offers tiered broadband service, and until 2013 our sales strategy was to promote all the tiers equally. We listed all the tiers on signage, collateral and advertisements. When talking with customers, we would recite the list of all the available broadband packages. We were associating a tier with what it might be useful for—the slower speeds for checking email and the faster for streaming video—and always trying to upsell to a faster speed tier based on number of connected devices, kids in the home, etc.

These approaches seem sensible, don’t they?

Albert Einstein said, “You cannot solve a problem with the same mind that created it.” Especially when you don’t realize there

is a problem in the first place! I gained a fresh perspective when a sales consultant we hired posed this simple question: Why are you offering anything less than the best service offering?

If our goal is to truly be a customer advocate, why would we not offer and want our customers to have anything less than the best possible online experience?

If the average household has 5.7 connected devices, the average adult spends over 5 hours per day online, and 51% of people stream video every week, clearly appetite for bandwidth is only going to grow. And that’s just the average.

Trying to determine a speed tier that best fits our customers’ needs based on the few questions we were asking is as backward as assuming what our customer can and cannot afford. Consider that our general manager, who is

now an empty nester with three children out of the house, is using more bandwidth than ever and has over 20 connected devices. That throws the logic of asking if there are kids in the house as a way to upsell broadband right out the window.

So we changed our perspective and our process. We instituted a few simple changes, and we began to see big results. After 12 months of implementing the “lead with your best” philosophy, we increased our take rate at our fastest speed tier by 300%. Three. Hundred. Percent.

A month after this perspective change we launched a broadband service in a new area. We are nine months in and our take rate is as follows: 86% at the fastest tier, 14% at the middle tier and 0% at the lowest tier. Before this launch, our average take rate looked like this: 12% at the fastest tier, 33% at the middle tier and 55% at the lowest speed tier.

Not only are we recovering our cost and turning a profit much faster, our customers are more satisfied with the service.

These are some simple but powerful changes we implemented that are yielding big results:

1. We only list our fastest broadband package on our marketing materials. On our website, the fastest tier is the most prominent.
2. All incentives and promotions are applicable only to our fastest speed tiers.
3. When discussing our broadband service, we always lead with our fastest package, allowing us to communicate the value of the service and sell the best possible online experience.

Customers always have the option of going slower if they wish, but our numbers prove that when offered the best first, they have a hard time turning it down. ■



Meredith Horn is marketing director for Big Bend Telephone Co. in Alpine, Texas. Contact her at Meredith.Horn@bbtco.com.

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The Consequences of Content Pricing

BY MASHA ZAGER

It isn't even news anymore. Every time a video provider renegotiates a contract with a content provider—a broadcast station or a cable network—content prices go up. In the last few years, prices have risen with dizzying speed, and they likely will continue their upward trajectory for the foreseeable future.

Small providers, including rural telcos, are hit hardest because they have little market power. Though they improve their leverage when they obtain programming through buying cooperatives, they still pay retransmission consent fees more than twice as high as larger providers for the same broadcast signals. In some cases, they pay as much as 20 times more, according to estimates made by the American Cable Association.

The FCC began examining the issue in the notice of inquiry for its “16th Video Competition Report,” and in its March 2014 open meeting took a step toward solving the problem by prohibiting top-four television broadcast stations from negotiating retransmission consent jointly with other top-four stations serving the same geographic market. (Essentially, separately owned stations had been permitted to collude in ways that pay-TV operators thought unfair.) However, it is possible that the FCC’s action will be overridden by Congress; even if the order is allowed to stand, it may not be sufficient to restore pay-TV operators’ balance of power in dealing with the broadcast stations.

The crux of the problem is that the Cable Television Consumer Protection and Competition Act of 1992, which was intended to protect consumers, gave broadcasters the right to charge pay-TV providers to retransmit over-the-air content. But over the last two decades, the broadcast industry consolidated to the point where fewer than 10 companies now control nearly all the over-the-air and cable content, while at the same time the number of video providers in each market grew as cable companies lost their right to exclusive franchises and as satellite and IPTV services offered new options. With the number of content providers decreasing and the number of video providers increasing, the balance of market power shifted in favor of the content providers.

To make matters worse, the broadcasters’ traditional advertising revenue model began to break down during the same period as audiences became increasingly fragmented. “New models have not been developed yet,” said telecommunications attorney Howard Shapiro of Bennet & Bennet (Bethesda, Md.). Viewers have turned away from traditional broadcast models to services such as Netflix and YouTube, which are





Many telcos now find that they have no choice but to raise video subscription rates—and face the heat from their customers.

starting to develop original programming of their own. When viewers do watch TV in the traditional ways, they often tune in to sporting events, which are increasingly costly for broadcasters to obtain. “Retransmission consent is one stream of revenue they [broadcasters] have to make up for lost advertising revenue,” Shapiro said.

As a result of their increased market power vis-à-vis distributors and their increased need for revenues, broadcast stations now can—and do—dictate retransmission consent fees and little or no “negotiating” actually goes on, according to the telcos interviewed for this article. They also dictate the bundling of their affiliated cable channels and the placement of those channels on favorable tiers. This makes constructing low-priced video tiers difficult for telcos.

The number of blackouts (stations being withdrawn from video providers) also has grown. Blackouts are used mostly by larger operators that have more leverage with content providers, but in a few cases, rural telcos have been blacked out, too.

All this makes life difficult for small video providers. Unlike, say, Comcast, whose video offering is still highly profitable, smaller telcos and cable companies started with razor-thin margins on video and have seen those margins wiped out after absorbing programming price increases for several years.

Simply dropping video service isn’t usually an option for companies that have physical infrastructure, ongoing programming contracts and, especially, demanding customers. “It’s a must-have offering,” said Gina Shuler, director of marketing at Home Telecom (Moncks Corner, S.C.), echoing a sentiment shared by many telcos. (In addition, dropping their video services might well lower telcos’ take rates for their more profitable broadband offerings.) It is occasionally possible to drop an expensive, unpopular channel—which Home Telecom did this year for the first time—but in most cases, unpopular channels are tied by their owners to popular ones that can’t be dropped.

Facing the Heat

Thus, many telcos now find that they have no choice but to raise video subscription rates—and face the heat from their customers.

And there will likely be heat. Though some telcos such as West Central Telephone Association (Sebeka, Minn.) said their customers are more likely to blame broadcasters, blaming the video provider appears to be the more common reaction.

“Every time there’s a rate increase, customers get angry,” said Missy Poje, director of marketing for Fidelity Communications in Sullivan, Mo. Fidelity trains its customer service representatives to be prepared for irate customers and to explain the background of the rate increases.

Beyond customer anger, there is a risk of having customers downgrade to lower video tiers—West Central Telephone has experienced a few such cases—or even cancel their sub-

scriptions altogether. Poje said, “We believe that cord cutting is very real and will continue to increase. There will be a time when customers, no matter how much they love their channels, won’t be able to afford them. We saw a pretty significant cable loss last year, directly due to raising rates. It’s a tough business to be in.”

Educating Customers

Communicating with customers about rate increases is a challenge for marketing directors. Most telcos work hard to limit rate increases to once a year, though some have been forced to move the increases up to earlier dates. Poje said that Fidelity Communications, which usually revises its rates in the summer, planned to raise rates April 1 this year. “Because we got a massive increase January 1, we’re losing hundreds of thousands of dollars for each month we delay,” she explained.

When a rate increase is necessary, preparing customers for it is important. Susan Christian, vice president of marketing at Ritter Communications (Jonesboro, Ark.), includes detailed bill inserts for customers that explain why rates are rising and that assure customers that Ritter makes every effort to cut costs and provide good programming. She also posts explanations on Ritter’s Facebook page. The company’s vice president of external affairs, John Strode, speaks at meetings of civic groups and writes articles for local newspapers to help educate customers about increasing programming fees.

Craig Otterness, general manager and chief executive officer of Spring Grove Communications (Spring Grove, Minn.), uses bill inserts and the company newsletter to warn customers of impending raises. In addition, he takes the opportunity to discuss the issue every year at the company’s annual meeting. “I always remind attendees that video rates are not like phone rates,” he said. “I tell them that video rates will go up every year, mostly because the contracts include percentage increases every year. I also remind them that we even have to pay for the off-air channels that they get for free with an antenna.”

Geri Salmela, marketing director at West Central Telephone, also directs customers to tvonmyside.com, a website developed by the National Cable Television Cooperative (NCTC) that explains the retransmission-fee issue in great detail. Any telco that buys programming through the NCTC can use a branded version of this website.

A Line Item on the Bill

The strongest way to get the message across may be to include a line item on the customer’s bill for programming increases. Shapiro warned that this approach requires caution. He said, “You have to be careful there’s not a provision in the agreement [with the broadcaster] that prohibits you from disclosing its terms and conditions. ... Also, be careful that, where you’re disclosing fees, you do it in a fair and

objective way.” For example, he said, even if you have to put in a new antenna to carry the broadcaster’s channels, don’t be tempted to include the amortization for the antenna in the retransmission line item.

Ritter Communications has passed its retransmission fees to customers as a separate “broadcast surcharge” since 2009. Because of the confidentiality requirements in its contracts with broadcasters, the company does not itemize the fees by channel; rather, the surcharge includes the sum of all the retransmission fees.

Political Action

Another thing telcos can do is to help customers channel their frustration into positive action. For example, Shuler said that Home Telecom, in its social media and other informal communications, suggests that concerned customers contact local leaders and ask for help. In past years, she said, customers have felt that programming fees were Home Telecom’s problem and not theirs, but that sentiment is beginning to shift.

Ritter Communications has taken an even stronger stance, issuing a press release in December 2013 endorsing the Video CHOICE Act introduced into Congress by Reps. Anna Eshoo (D-Calif.) and Zoe Lofgren (D-Calif.). The bill would tilt the balance of power back toward video providers (and their customers) by, among other things, prohibiting channel bundling. Strode explained, “I don’t believe the Video CHOICE Act is perfect—or any other legislation is—but it is certainly a good platform for discussion of the issues. ... If it gets to the point where the legislation starts to move or be considered in committee, we will speak to civic clubs in our area and encourage them ... to contact members of Congress and express their support.”

Sweeten the Package

Telcos often try to include good news in their messaging to balance out the video rate increases. For example, Salmela said West Central Telephone tries to add more value by keeping the cost of high-definition service low, offering HD at a flat fee rather than per channel. It also added viewing options at no additional cost with its watchTVeverywhere services, which allow TV subscribers to view live and prerecorded TV on a variety of connected devices. Salmela explained, “Essentially, this allows them to take their TV services with them wherever they go. This also creates a need for higher broadband speed in the home and gives us a great opportunity.”

Home Telecom is offering remote DVR scheduling, as well as a portal where customers can access all their online content, and the telco has plans to launch full-home DVR. Ritter Communications helps customers craft triple-play bundles that are more appropriate for them and help them save money.

Cooperating with broadcasters also helps. Shapiro advised telcos to build positive relationships with local broadcast stations by working together on projects of common interest, such as public-service announcements or local newsgathering, or by offering low-cost concessions that are valuable to the local station (carrying an unrequired ancillary station, for example).

He said, “If you find a way to give them noncash things that work for you and them, then [the negotiation] becomes not just about money. You’re in your best position to get a better rate.”

The tactic won’t work for everyone, he warned—some station owners take a harder line than others—but in the cases where it does, it has the potential to save telcos some of those painful discussions with customers. ■

Masha Zager is a freelance writer. Contact her at masha@bridgewriter.com.



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THE POWER



TRADITIONAL

BY RACHEL BROWN

Blogging, tweeting, yammering, yelping. These may be some of the buzz words associated with social media, but some of us “older” folks (defined as anyone over 30) can’t help but think they sound like the unfortunate symptoms of a nervous condition.

Social media—particularly when it comes to marketing and advertising—seems to get all the hype and attention. And while it’s a growing phenomenon that certainly has its merits, it still represents only a relatively small part of most marketing budgets.

According to a joint survey by the business school of Duke University and the American Management Association, social media marketing accounted for only about 6.6% of marketing budgets in 2013. The survey forecasted this percentage to grow to 9.1% this year and to 15.8% within five years.

These numbers are not insignificant, but they boil down to the fact that traditional marketing (which spans everything from television commercials, radio spots, billboard ads, direct mailings and bill inserts to sign-up events, door hangers, cold calling and more) still represents the lion’s share of the marketing budgets and efforts. By these tallies, traditional marketing will get more than 90% of the budget this year and will account for nearly 85% in 2018.



AND PLACE

MARKETING



Talk to the marketing folks at small telephone companies and they'll tell you that this does not surprise them because they know that traditional marketing has its place and its power.



Customers With Kids

Missy Poje—director of marketing for Fidelity Communications Co. (Sullivan, Mo.)—is proud that her company's complete marketing campaign won an NTCA—The Rural Broadband Association TeleChoice Award last year, but she said she's more proud of her marketing team and the results they achieve.

"We use both traditional and online media," Poje explained. "Traditional includes TV spots, billboards, direct mail; online media is our search engines, Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and sign-ups on our website. It's very integrated."

Poje said Fidelity most sees the value of its traditional marketing when it comes to reaching its more established customers. "We serve small-town America, and we have a lot of older customers," she said. "The sweet spot for us are our 35-year-olds to 54-year-olds. That segment generates our highest revenues."





FOCUSING ON FUN



Don't be afraid to have fun with your marketing and stand out from the crowd, said Missy Poje, director of marketing for Fidelity Communications Co. (Sullivan, Mo.). "Everybody's advertising tends to look the same," she said. "You're selling fun services so don't be afraid to do something crazy." Fidelity has been using a superhero theme with its Captain Powerful mascot for the past two years, Poje said, explaining that the mascot is really an engineer with the telco. "Our TV ads with him are wacky and crazy and off-the-wall silly. At Christmastime, we had him wearing a Santa suit and dancing. In the summer, he was swimming with kids in a pool. People will tell us they're so corny, but they're laughing and talking about them."



"How do I hook up my laptop to the TV?" she said. "Our techs will run over to someone's house to reset the DVR [digital video recorder] box or even hit the power button on the TV. People still need a consultant and a guide for this technology."

But good luck finding that level of service and commitment from one of the big providers, Poje said. "If you're a Dish or DirecTV customer and you have a problem, it'll take them a week or a week and a half to come out and fix it," she said. "With us, we're out that day or the next day."

When it comes to comparisons to the competition, Poje said it's smart to make it more than just lip service. "In our mailings, we'll do a little chart to show how we stack up to the competition in our area," she explained. "We'll say

something like, 'Here's how we're better: Better price, faster speed, no contracts, no caps on data, no installation fees.' Think about the message that your customer wants to hear. It's not just about who you are and what you're offering."

Gary Schotanus, sales manager with OmniTel Communications (Nora Springs, Iowa), underlined the importance of thinking about the customer's perspective. When OmniTel launched its fiber-to-the-home rollout in some of its communities, Schotanus said the telco made sure that its marketing campaign had an awareness and education portion to it. "We knew that our customers would soon be seeing the boring machines and crews and us plowing fiber," he explained. "We wanted to explain why we were doing it and go over the benefits and advantages to them so that the construction wouldn't just be an inconvenience for them."

A town hall meeting to give a 10-minute PowerPoint presentation and to answer questions goes a long way toward overcoming the grumble that "the phone company is tearing up my yard," Schotanus said, adding that he's been pleasantly surprised at the turnout at some of OmniTel's town hall meetings.

In one town of 500 people, 75 came out to a town hall meeting on a weeknight, Schotanus said. "There were more who came but left because there wasn't enough room in the hall," he said.

Another successful marketing strategy has been holding four-day sign-up events at local fire halls or the American

That demographic has more disposable income because they're more established in their lives and their careers. They're also users of advanced telecommunications services, Poje said. "The [baby] boomers are very technologically savvy, and they're willing to spend the most money to get those services," she said.

Roger Gray—chief executive officer and founder of GKV, an advertising agency—pointed out that customers in the 35–54 age group have different telecommunications needs. "They're likely to have kids at home," he said, noting that this alone drives up demand for products and services. "If they've got teenagers, that's more cellphone use, more Internet, different cable packages."

Even for customers older than 54, there's still a demand for advanced telecommunications services, Gray said. "Today's senior is not the senior of yesteryear," he said. "Today's seniors are much more active, much more engaged in life. This is not an old man sitting on a bench."

Poje agreed that Fidelity's older customers are a busy bunch. "They're watching TV. They're driving past billboards. They're reading the local newspaper," she said, noting that all of these activities play into traditional marketing, including radio spots for times in the car. "You have to have multiple solutions for multiple customers."

Gray noted that older rural consumers are more likely to have greater allegiance to local brands. "They are interested in what's homegrown in the backyard," he said, advising small telcos to play this up in their marketing efforts by using footage or photos of local landmarks. "It's not just about the services you provide, it's about the heritage of the company and its roots and the fact that customers will be dealing with local people."

Track Down a Tech

Most rural telecommunications providers have branded themselves as the local providers, Poje said. "That's what we are," she said. "Everyone knows that they can track down a tech or customer service rep at the grocery store or at church—and, believe me, they do."

Poje said this does not surprise her because there's a lot more need for handholding with advanced technology.



OmniTel gives away branded water bottles at its sign-up event and leaves door hangers for prospective customers.





The single fastest growing marketing strategy for Shenandoah Telecommunications (Shentel; Edinburg, Va.) is its grassroots efforts, said Willy Pirtle, vice president of wireless and the Shentel brand. "At Rotary Club meetings, Little League games and booths at the local fairs, we'll bring in a 20-foot trailer with our logo on it and have five 40-inch flat-screen TVs set up to showcase our products and service," he said. The company also sets up a charcoal barbecue and grills hotdogs. "A little smoke and some flashy technology gets everyone's attention," Pirtle said.



Legion, Schotanus said. "We'll put ads in the newspaper to advertise this and run ads on billboards in the area," he said, explaining that this allowed people to come in and talk directly to the sales reps. "When the sales reps had some downtime, they could be on the phone calling people in the area and saying, 'We're here. Come over and see us.'"

OmniTel also had giveaway items at its sign-up events, such as notepads and pens, as well as branded OmniTel water bottles with the company name, logo, telephone number and website. "We had free cookies, too," Schotanus said.

The sign-up events were especially useful in communities that were 30 miles or more away from the corporate office, Schotanus said. He also considered the weather and the age of his customers. Schotanus noted that a lot of OmniTel's customers are 65 and older.

"We held these sign-up events in the fall so the weather was nice, and it was easy for our elderly customers to come out. They want to have their questions answered face to face," he said, conceding that this takes extra time and manpower. "But it's well worth the investment because you have a much more content customer. If they have a name and a face, they feel they have a contact point if there's ever a question or a problem."

None of this effort was outsourced; instead the telco used its own salespeople. "You need the right people and we have them," he said. "When you take the personal route, your employees are the ambassadors for your company. You can't underestimate the value of that."

Research Before Rebranding

Shenandoah Telecommunications Co. (Shentel; Edinburg, Va.) also carefully considered the role and value of its employees when it

rolled out its rebranding efforts a few years ago. "The minute the phone rings, you want your employees to know how to treat customers," said Willy Pirtle, vice president of wireless and the Shentel brand.

Shentel found it necessary to launch a rebranding campaign after buying three local cable companies, Pirtle explained. Fewer than half of their new customers had even heard of the company. Compounding that problem was the fact that previous cable companies had made promises that they were unable to fulfill.

The first step in its campaign was to conduct customer research, Pirtle said. "We found that they thought it was important that we are local. Our call center is not in

India," he said. Reliability and dependability were also important. "If the power goes out, the phone stays on. They want to be able to call the electric company to tell them to restore power, and they want to be able to check on loved ones."

Armed with this information, Shentel's initial marketing efforts to the new customers did not focus on products or services.

"Instead, it was all about who we are and what we do," Pirtle said, noting that Shentel ran a very traditional campaign using television, radio and direct mail. "We believed traditional methods would be more effective than social media because we were targeting an older demographic—35- to 55-year-olds, the heads of the households. We also were not sure how many of our customers had Internet service. We certainly knew that they watched more TV than spent time on the Internet."

Later on, when the campaign did extend to spe-

PUSHING THE ENVELOPE

When thinking about marketing and advertising, small telcos would be wise not to overlook simple solutions, advised Charlene Taylor, chief executive officer and creative director of Chaz Taylor Inc. (Nashville, Tenn.), a marketing resource group. "Traditional marketing is the vanilla ice cream that everyone goes back to," she said, adding that telco customers still love paper and print. "The majority of customers who signed up for a new service last year were prompted by bill inserts."

Taylor said that bill inserts are a simple, nonpushy way to advertise a new service or product. "We call this the 'chicken and the egg' approach," she said. "It's not considered cool, but it's familiar and complete."

Gary Schotanus—sales manager with OmniTel Communications (Nora Springs, Iowa)—agreed, noting that the telco printed order forms and included self-addressed stamped envelopes in its second round of door hangers and that these proved to be highly successful. "Many were surprised when the mail came in the next week with all the sign-ups," he said. "This lets people do business with us immediately. We can't believe we didn't do this the first time."



cific products and services, Shentel incorporated some of the same images and clips from its brand marketing as a tie-in, Pirtle explained. Throughout the entire process, Shentel kept its employees in the loop. "We researched our employees—everyone from the executive team down to the janitor. Once we had a company mission statement and vision, we spent a full day of training all of our employees—700 people in four states—so they knew our mission and vision and could talk to our customers."

This shared understanding leads to better customer service, Pirtle said. "Telecommunications is a commodity business these days," he said. "The way to compete is to connect better to your customers."

Part of that customer connection also comes down to year-round communication and marketing, Gray said. "With something like telecommunications services, you

Fidelity Communications (Sullivan, Mo.) often offers free T-shirts at its sign-up events, said Missy Poje, director of marketing. "It's amazing what people will do to get a free T-shirt," she said, adding that it costs the telco about \$5 per shirt. "But it's fabulous advertising because everyone's walking around town wearing your name."



never know when a customer is going to sign up," he said. "You don't know when their contract runs out or when they get disgusted with their current service. That's why you must maintain a constant presence."

For Shentel, this came down to running television commercials and radio spots, as well as doing two or three mailings a quarter, Gray said. "If you see a spot on TV, hear an ad on the radio, and get a piece of mail—that's three

times a day, and that's a powerful message," he said.

For small telcos not certain if they have pockets deep enough for this level of marketing or to hire an outside advertising firm, Gray said the first step could be hiring a marketing consultant to come in and analyze the local market and to look at past marketing efforts in terms of what has and has not worked. "Once the analysis is done, the consultant can then make recommendations," he said.

👉 DON'T FORGET FACEBOOK 👈

Most marketing gurus agree that even if a company opts to spend the majority of its time and money on traditional marketing, it's still important to tie those efforts back into its online or social media presence.

"Everyone's always wondering what to post on their social media sites," said Jennifer Mehaffey, an independent marketing consultant. She suggested that posting traditional marketing is a smart business move. "Say you have a new billboard, take a picture of it, and post it on your Facebook page and ask your followers: 'Have you seen our new billboard? What do you think of it?'"

The same is true for TV commercials and radio ads, which generate additional interest while also providing feedback, Mehaffey said. "You can even do this with your direct mailers by including your Facebook logo on them," she said. "Traditional marketing is all about eyeballs. It's all about reach. Social media is another channel for that, one that we didn't have even five to 10 years ago."

Mehaffey pointed out that this reach can be extended even further by tapping into the social media sites of partner companies, as well as media outlets (newspapers and TV and radio stations). "If you're putting out press releases and new product announcements, tag those with the social media platforms of your partners and customers," she said. Most media outlets have their own Twitter feeds, so tap into those and tag it to do cross-feeds, she said.

While the sheer size of Facebook is staggering (1.26 billion users), it is still often viewed as a medium only for younger people. But statistics show this is changing. "The fastest growing demographic on Facebook is 45- to 54-year-olds," Mehaffey said. "On Twitter, the fastest growing demographic is 55- to 64-year-olds."

Posting your traditional marketing on social media sites comes down to getting more bang for the buck, Mehaffey said. "In a small business, those marketing dollars are precious," she said. "Social media is an inexpensive way to extend your reach and capitalize on that investment."

If the decision is to hire a full-service ad agency to carry out those recommendations, Gray said the next step is to set a budget and find an agency that will deem that size of an account important and worthwhile. "Invite three agencies to meet with you and weigh the chemistry of the people," he said. "Do you like these people? Do they listen well? Do you have a good rapport with them? Do they have a passion for your industry? Will they be dedicated to helping you achieve your goals?"

In the end—whether it's in-house or through an ad agency—there's never been a better time to have a strong marketing message. "This is a tumultuous time for our industry because there are so many changes," Fidelity's Poje said. "The best thing we can do is create a solid, consistent, friendly brand that provides the high level of service that we're all known for." ■

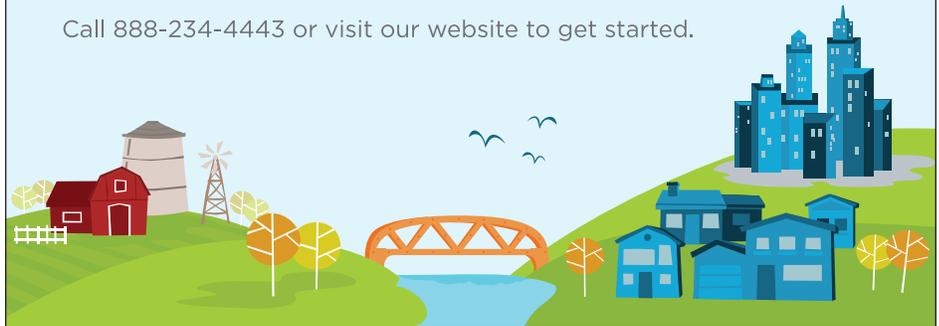
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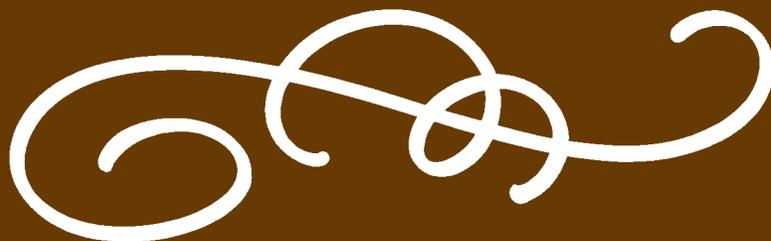
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ALL
BUSINESS:

how to
Entice

INDUSTRY
CUSTOMERS





he rapid introduction of new business communications solutions means there are more players competing for the same revenue. Businesses need to be enticed to become customers and then enticed to remain loyal. The key to success in this environment is stepping up marketing efforts that differentiate your company and strengthen long-term business relationships. If you're looking for ways to achieve this, you might find the actions of your industry peers helpful.

The Lure of Knowledge

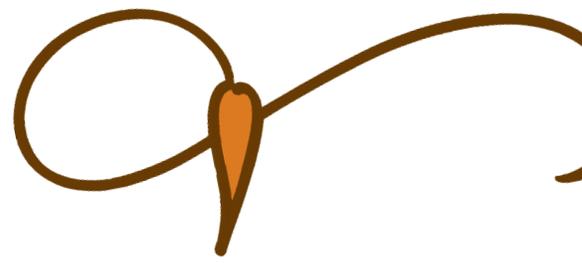
Nex-Tech (Lenora, Kan.) is raising the bar when it comes to using educational opportunities to lure business customers. The company is organizing TechEdge, a new conference for business technology experts, which will be held at Fort Hays State University. Nex-Tech Marketing Analyst Trisha Sauer explained that the telco is targeting current customers and new prospects such as hospitals and government agencies, with a goal of getting 200 to 300 attendees.

Keynote speaker Mitch Holthus, the voice of the Kansas City Chiefs, and an FBI presentation on business security are draws for the event. At least 15 to 20 of the telco's vendor partners are expected to participate and run breakout sessions. Those sessions will cover topics such as security and surveillance, cellular technology, phone systems and VoIP, wireless access and mobile devices, cloud systems and network security.

Existing and potential business customers are expected to enjoy the \$15,000 prize-a-palooza. A portion of those prizes will come from participating vendors, which are required to provide a prize valued at \$300. In return, the vendor will receive registrants' information and the pleasure of drawing the winning name for the vendor's prize contribution.

For those interested in undertaking a similar event, Sauer recommends leveraging vendor relationships and enticing attendees with a recognized "name" to be the keynote speaker. To market the event, the company used its e-newsletters, videos and email, in addition to plugging the event during the company's two monthly business-oriented webinars.





Personal Touch

Bridget Watkins, vice-president of marketing and sales for All West Communications (Kamas, Utah), stated that business customers are key to the company's revenue and profitability. To win and keep those customers, the telco's objective was to do something its competitors couldn't easily replicate in its incumbent and competitive local exchange carrier (CLEC) areas. The telco's solution was to dedicate specific sales reps to specific business customers and to support those reps with a dedicated inside coordinator.

“WE KNEW THROUGH OUR TRACKING THAT WE WERE RESOLVING ISSUES QUICKLY, SO WE HAD SET THE BAR HIGH FOR OURSELVES TO MAINTAIN.”

BRIDGET WATKINS
VICE-PRESIDENT OF MARKETING AND SALES
ALL WEST COMMUNICATIONS

In filling the business-dedicated positions, Watkins said, “We weren't interested in someone who could sell ice to Eskimos. We were looking for people who could recognize win-win situations; someone that could get to know our customers on a personal level and make the business relationships feel more like a partnership.”

For the dedicated sales rep program to work, it's vital to know profit margins. At All West, sales reps must accrue sales equal to the amount the company pays to employ the person before bonuses

can be earned. Based on the service profit margins, the bonus rates are set to encourage reps to sell higher profit-margin offerings.

“Margins constantly change because of industry dynamics, and every quarter things get adjusted to adapt to those changes,” she stated. “We want to generate revenue, and we want it to be profitable revenue.”

The program kicked off in August 2013. In October a survey was conducted to obtain business feedback. One finding was that All West's customers expect issues to be resolved in less than four hours. “We knew through our tracking that we were resolving issues quickly, so we had set the bar high for ourselves to maintain,” Watkins said.

Watkins explained that customers in the CLEC area have had experience with other service providers, and when customers in that CLEC area look at the service they received from their prior provider and compare it to the service they get from All West, the customers in the CLEC are reluctant to switch because they know from experience that the level of the service isn't likely to be as good.

“Businesses in the CLEC know from experience they won't get that level of service from our competitors. It makes a customer think twice if

CenturyLink or Comcast comes knocking,” she stated.

The program seems to be paying off. The company hired an additional sales rep in February 2014 to keep pace with inquiries from businesses.

Prevent the Runaround

Nex-Tech has started a slightly different type of service-oriented program. Marketing Sales Manager Dustin Schlaefli explained that Nex-Tech is a diversified, statewide operation that offers a multitude of business technology services in addition to its traditional phone and broadband offerings. Since calls from business accounts could come in to one of the company's 16 stores, Internet help desk, customer service or receptionist, the result was “a lot of hands in the pot.”

To streamline the business customer's experience, Nex-Tech dedicated internal support reps to provide businesses with concierge customer service. Business customers were segmented based on their size, volume and longevity with Nex-Tech. Those companies with the highest rankings, and a few others that were hand-selected, were each assigned a specific internal business concierge. For all other business customers, the concierge group would provide a point of service on a first-available basis.

The goal of the program is to provide business customers with a more streamlined experience by having the concierge be the business' single point of contact. The job



Cherie Jamison provides Nex-Tech businesses clients with with concierge customer service.

“THE BIGGEST CHALLENGE FOR US WAS DETERMINING HOW MANY STAFF WE’D NEED TO DEDICATE TO PROVIDE THE SERVICE.”

DUSTIN SCHLAEFLI
MARKETING SALES MANAGER
NEXTECH

quickly resolve higher-level questions for customers or determine the resources needed to provide the on-site service if required.

“The biggest challenge for us was determining how many staff we’d need to dedicate to provide the service,” Schlaefli stated. The program kicked off in October 2013 with three full-time employees. A fourth position was added in February 2014.

Tap In-House IT Experts

ComSouth Telecommunications (Hawkinsville, Ga.) business customers have access to a geek-squad-on-steroids

requirements for the concierge positions include being highly trained on the telco and technology billing system, knowing the wireless side of Nextech’s operation and being somewhat technical. The goal is that these individuals can

type of service. ComSouth’s Glitch Guys originally provided computer and IT support for consumer accounts. Its success paved the way for ComSouth Business Services. Unlike the consumer-oriented program, Business Services pulls together resources from its Glitch Guys, sales team, customer service group and field techs to provide the communication and IT services desired by the business.

Mike Penn, vice president of marketing and sales, stated that consumers normally have just a one-off need ranging from “my computer is slow [to] ... doesn’t work well [or] ... has a virus.” These customers typically elect to bring their computer to a ComSouth office where a Glitch Guy provides answers.

“Business needs are more extensive. They need on-site support for services ranging from configuring networks, installing phone and

“WE’VE CREATED A SERVICE NICHE BY PULLING FROM OUR RANGE OF RESOURCES AND SKILLS, WHICH COMPETITIVE SOLUTION PROVIDERS HAVE FOUND DIFFICULT TO MATCH.”

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video services, and providing cabling services, backup solutions and computer diagnostics,” Penn stated. “We’ve created a service niche by pulling from our range of resources and skills, which competitive solutions providers have found difficult to match.”

Offer the Latest and Greatest Services

One of the latest services that may help telcos entice and keep business customers is called hosted unified communications (UC), which typically includes cloud-

based PBX and managed services. ANPI (Springfield, Ill.) is one of several companies offering the ability to private label a hosted UC solution.

ANPI’s hosted UC bundles hosted PBX, unified messaging, present and active instant messaging, audio/Web/voice collaboration, desktop sharing and integrated mobility. Having this level of sophisticated communication capability traditionally has been financially out of reach for medium and small companies but is now offered in one fully integrated solution. With the private label offering, telcos can repackage the hosted UC solution to target the business market. Because the offering is completely turnkey, telcos

can start selling the solution immediately while receiving sales training, marketing support and support assistance from ANPI.

Chief Marketing Officer David Byrd stated that one of the primary benefits to a telco offering a hosted UC product is that it gives them the flexibility to gain business customers outside of the telco’s service infrastructure. Because it’s an IP offering and not a telecommunications service, telcos can sell to businesses beyond their borders as long as they have a broadband connection.

“Telcos can add new revenues inside and outside their established territories using the host UC product, while still keeping their traditional offering and price structure intact,” he said. For businesses buying the hosted UC service, they get communications services at a more competitive rate.

ANPI’s solution is currently in use at Kingdom Technology Solutions (Fulton, Mo.), the CLEC for Kingdom Telephone Co. (Auxvasse, Mo.), and at Cir-



The ANPI Hosted Unified Communications Private Label Package.

rinity Wireless, the CLEC of Wittenberg Telephone (Wittenberg, Wis.). Kingdom Technology Solutions and Cirrinity are using the system for their own businesses and are now offering the service for resale under their own brand names.

In early April, ANPI formed a strategic alliance with Indatel a team of wholesale carriers that provide telecommunications solutions via fiber option network routes throughout rural and metro America. The companies believe the synergy between their organizations will enable them both to provide future customers with greater efficiencies and economies for deploying services.

Tailor-Made Solutions

Few telcos still enjoy being the only game in town. For the majority of providers, as technology continues to evolve, marketing efforts are becoming increasingly important for securing revenue and profits as well as warding off competition.

As a major contributor to the financial health of a telco, business accounts are particularly valuable. That makes it well worth looking for opportunities to become an indispensable resource and business partner, ideally through a means that will be difficult for your competitors to replicate.

Maybe it will be through educational events where there is the added potential for networking to generate word-of-mouth advertising between your current customers and new business opportunities. Maybe it will be achieved by ensuring your customers don’t feel like they are getting the run-around because they have one reliable point of contact. Perhaps strategically leveraging the existing skill sets in your company will provide businesses with the peace of mind that no matter what IT issue crops up, they can get it resolved quickly. Or, maybe offering the latest communications technologies will be what’s needed to persuade customers to sign on and stay with your telco.

While there is no one-size-fits-all marketing approach for winning and keeping business accounts, being aware of successful approaches used by industry peers provides a useful idea base to help you tailor your own new marketing efforts. ■

Anna Henry is a freelance writer. Contact her at Headlineink@comcast.net.

“TELCOs CAN ADD NEW REVENUES INSIDE AND OUTSIDE THEIR ESTABLISHED TERRITORIES USING THE HOST UC PRODUCT, WHILE STILL KEEPING THEIR TRADITIONAL OFFERING AND PRICE STRUCTURE INTACT.”

DAVID BYRD
CHIEF MARKETING OFFICER
ANPI

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BIG Changes From BIG Data

How Rural Telcos Are Using Analytics for Sales and Marketing

BY JOE DYSART

Rural telcos looking for tools to crunch their Web marketing are in luck: Dozens of big-data analytics solutions are available that will make the most of their presence in the digital space.

“Before using Google Analytics, we were just blindly guessing who was using our website, what information they were going after, and [we] imagined everyone at a desktop computer,” said Geri Salmela, marketing director at West Central Telephone Association (Sebeka, Minn.). “We spent money building a website that was to appeal to the masses. Now, we focus on the correct audience.”

Bridgette Northern, marketing coordinator at Adams Telephone Cooperative (Golden, Ill.), also uses the free analytics program: “Google Analytics allows us to see what pages get the best traffic, longest time spent on a page, and lowest bounce rates and site exits. This data allows us to adjust our content to make it relevant to our users.”

Fortunately, market research firm Forrester has conducted a rigorous study of the crème de la crème of digital analytics tools focusing on the Web’s hottest marketing opportunity right now: social media.

“The days of letting the intern manage the Facebook page are long gone,” said Nate Elliott, lead author of the Forrester report on social media dashboards, “Social Relationship Platforms, Q2 2013.”

“Most larger marketers now maintain at least 10 Facebook pages,” Elliot added. “And marketers aren’t just on Facebook anymore. More than 90% maintain a presence on Twitter, nearly as many use

LinkedIn and more than half even use Google+.”

Aaron Everson, president of analytics company Shoutlet, added, “Social marketers continually face a building list of challenges—from execution to analytics—and the pressure to prove market return-on-investment to the C-suite is mounting.”

For us, learning that our 55-plus customers are the main users of our website allows us to tailor the website specifically to them.

Gerri Salmela,
Marketing Director,
West Central
Telephone
Association







FITZWATER PHOTOGRAPHY



Using Sprout, “we have discovered what topics are of interest to our followers and also what times of day are most effective for advertising.”

Kim Simpson, KPU's division head of sales, marketing and customer service.

Who's Using Your Site?

West Central's Salmela said probably the biggest eye-opener she's derived from analytics was discovering that most people clicking on the telco's website are 55 and older.

“For us, learning that our 55-plus customers are the main users of our website allows us to tailor the website specifically to them,” Salmela said. “Knowing this, our strategy is simplicity and ease of use. We have big revolving banners with concise information on current news and promotions that, when clicked, take the user directly to the full story. We also feature big graphics—in addition to Web buttons and text—to make it easy to find how to pay your bill online, for example.”

Salmela also has noticed a major spike in visits from mobile visits over time—“enough that we took notice and reworked the website making it mobile-user friendly,” she said.

In social analytics, while Forrester stressed that none of the big-data program dashboards it evaluated can be considered perfect, most go a long way toward pulling together and managing virtually all the elements of a highly effective and highly interactive social media presence.

Kim Simpson, division head of sales, marketing and customer service at KPU Telecommunications (Ketchikan, Alaska), said she's had good luck using Sprout Social (www.sproutsocial.com) to analyze the telco's presence on Facebook.

Using Sprout, “we have discovered what topics are of interest to our followers and also what times of day are most effective for advertising and/or messaging to our subscribers,” Simpson said.

Simpson said many insights from Facebook and other social media analytics packages can be transferred over to a telco's website. After studying traffic on Facebook, for example, KPU decided to “not mix too many topics on one Web page for the new site.”

“Our old site was very cluttered,” Simpson said. “Not only will the new site be cleaner and each page more focused, but we will be able to get a better understanding of what is of most interest to consumers by watching the browsing habits.”

Ahead of the Pack

Most of the social analytics products Forrester puts at the front-of-the-pack automate the scheduling and posting of text and multimedia across a wide array of social media networks.

Most also enable a telco to monitor how its brand is faring on social media—both among casual users of Facebook and other networks, as well as more

engaged influencers, like bloggers. “Once they've tracked customer questions and comments, these tools help marketers analyze which require attention and then allow them to respond to those posts,” Elliot said.

Moreover, most of the strong performers also help telecom staff greatly automate the processing of social media—including reading and analyzing, and sorting out who at the company should respond to a specific post.

In addition, these “social relationship platforms” help marketers manage all their social accounts, as well as all the employees permitted to post to those accounts. And most of the solutions “can assign different permission levels to different employees, and offer workflow tools for routing inbound posts to the right teams,” Elliot said.

Plus, most of the dashboards can also ensure that select—or even all—outbound

posts are reviewed by appropriate staff. Legal may want a gander at some posts before they go live, for example. Marketing may want to fine-tune others.

All told, Forrester evaluated social media dashboards using a 49-point checklist. It also surveyed each vendor about its product, asked for product demos, and interviewed three to five actual users of each product.

Here's how the performers Forrester presents as front-runners stack up:

> **Sprinkler:** “Sprinkler offers the most powerful technology on the market,” Elliot flatly stated. “Sprinkler set out to build a potent technology, and it succeeded.” Forrester especially liked how Sprinkler can both auto-analyze inbound posts, and auto-trigger reactions to those posts. On the downside, Forrester found the learning curve for Sprinkler relatively steep.

> **Hearsay Social:** Telcos especially interested in leveraging social media for sales will want to take a much closer look at Hearsay Social, according to Forrester. “It offers sophisticated content sharing



DELANEY SELANDER

Before using Google Analytics, we were just blindly guessing who was using our website.

Geri Salmela, marketing director, West Central Telephone Association



Scott Doniger, a vice president at Sprinkler—the most powerful social media dashboard on the market, according to Forrester.



Chief Executive Officer Mark Zuckerberg's 1 billion-plus Facebook members represent an extremely lucrative marketing opportunity for rural telcos savvy in analytics.

and seeding features, and its permissioning and oversight tools are among the best we evaluated," Elliot said.

On the downside, some clients were disappointed with Hearsay's reporting, according to Elliot. Plus, the tool is unable to create or post rich content to social media.

> **Spredfast:** "Clients were most pleased with Spredfast's measurement and reporting capabilities," Elliot said. It also helps users monitor posts on a number of sites, and is available as an iPhone app. The downside: While the tool can monitor posts, it cannot analyze those posts. Nor can it automatically tag those posts or route them.

> **Shoutlet:** "Shoutlet doesn't have any one feature that'll steal your heart," Elliot said. "But its long list of very good functionality adds up to our top score for current offerings." On the downside, "the company's focus is squarely on tactical social solutions, rather than on helping social media provide broader business value to marketers," Elliot said.

> **Salesforce.com's Buddy Media:** Overall, Forrester found this tool easy-to-use. Plus, Buddy offers one of the better tool sets for posting marketing content to social networks, Elliot said. On the downside, the product has limited monitor-and-respond functionality, and its client satisfaction score lagged those of the other vendors Forrester evaluated.

> **Adobe Social:** "Adobe gets the basics right," Elliot said. Unlike many of the tools evaluated, Adobe Social is more about measuring social success than creating it, he added. Still, the product "monitors a broad list of sites and analyzed posts for sentiment and influence. And it offers good post scheduling and targeting tools." On the downside, the product is no standout in comparison to any of the other tools evaluated.

One caveat: Once you decide on an analytics tool, be sure you thoroughly train appro-

appropriate staff on its use. Said Adams Telephone's Northern, "Unless website owners take time to review and analyze their reports on a regular basis, and then take time to use that data to make changes to their website, they are missing out on the biggest advantage that [analytics] provides." ■

Joe Dysart is an Internet speaker and business consultant. Contact him at joe@joedysart.com.

"It made sense to have CoBank as our financial partner. Since they're a cooperative, they understand our business and our needs."

Bill Squires, Chief Executive Officer, Blackfoot Telecommunications Group



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How to Put the Sizzle in Your Marketing Steak

The sales function is built into the DNA of every business. It's as basic and unquestioned as a great steak at a company sales meeting.

The story with marketing is quite different. It's often viewed as a side dish to the sales entrée, nice but not necessary, particularly when the economy is either very good or very bad. When things are humming, who needs it, and when the economy tanks, we can't afford it.

There's something of an inbred ambivalence about marketing—wanting it but not really trusting it. Even more to the point is a pervasive doubt that it's worth the investment or that it doesn't really make much of a difference.

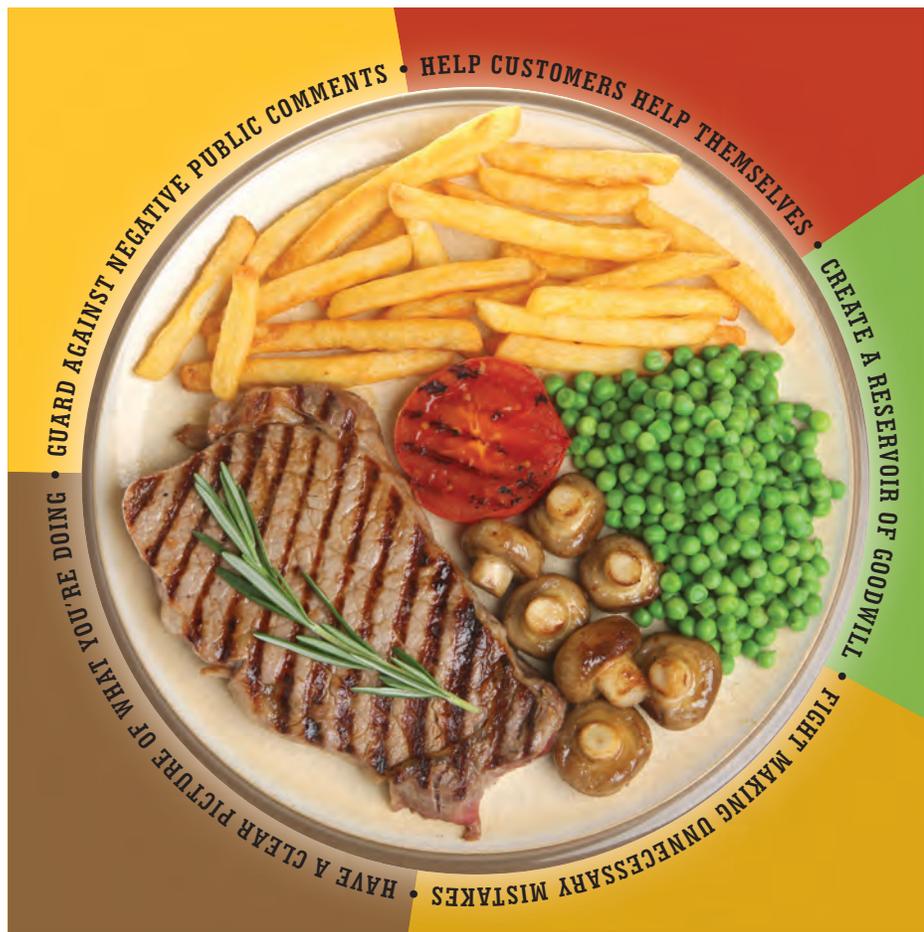
It's not surprising that marketing often finds itself on the defensive, never quite sure of its future. Even so, the value of marketing today is growing. Here are five ingredients that make marketing the key to any telecom-revenues meal.

> Guard against negative public comments. This applies to every business—including yours—and here's why. In the past, negative comments were mostly limited to word-of-mouth, with minimal spillover. Now that those same comments are viral, get prepared before you get hit.

Make it a continuing priority to encourage satisfied customers to share their thoughts about your business. Satisfied customers often remain silent so they need to know how important it is to have their support. Unsigned testimonials look contrived; be sure they include names and cities or towns. Otherwise, don't use them. Make it easy and convenient for customers to post comments.

Just when you think it will never happen, it will.

There's something of an inbred ambivalence about marketing—wanting it but not really trusting it.



> Create a reservoir of goodwill.

It doesn't appear on the company books, but you can take it to the bank. More often than not, its value is ignored, not taken seriously or dismissed as less than a "soft" asset. Whatever else it's called, it's goodwill.

Avon has banked enormous amounts of it with its longtime national sponsorship of the "Avon Walk for Breast Cancer." Bank of America wants more of it. Meanwhile, much maligned BP (British Petroleum), having learned a bitter lesson with the horrendous Gulf oil spill debacle, is attempting to capture as much as possible by spending millions of dollars on an ongoing series of "public service" TV ads describing the company's role in the cleanup, what it's doing to ensure it won't happen again and the role hundreds of thousands of its employees play in the economy. This is a carefully crafted program that's designed to change the public's image of the company.

A far better approach is to pay it forward so that there is an existing reservoir of goodwill available should trouble strike. ▶

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> Help customers help themselves.

Ian Gordon of Convergence Management Consultants offered an indispensable marketing insight. He contends that the incredible pace of change in technology, attitudes and products doesn't give customers enough time to adjust, which causes continual stress, discomfort and frustration.

Why is this important? What difference does it make? He points out that whether we admit it or not, we need help to make successful adjustments. Otherwise, we avoid what makes us feel uncomfortable. Recognizing this, businesses that take the customer experience seriously help their customers to help themselves to avoid negative feelings that can lead to opting out.

The Boston Globe, like so many newspapers, saw subscriptions nose-dive at the same time that its free online products were failing to attract subscribers. Then, things changed.

**Caving
in is easy, but
maintaining one's
objectivity in the face of
pressures to the contrary
takes strength, more
than most possess.**

Early in 2013, the subscription decline stopped and slowly moved upward, mostly with paid subscribers to its new, unique electronic edition. Customized for individual readers, the presentation of key stories is just right.

Today, "intuitive" claims abound but

few deliver on such a promise. The companies we do business with need to make sure they are providing the assistance that helps customers to help themselves.

> Fight making unnecessary mistakes.

Marketers worth their salt welcome a major marketing challenge, one that flies in the face of "going along to get along." Caving in is easy, but maintaining one's objectivity in the face of pressures to the contrary takes strength, more than most possess. This is a task that often requires raising questions about proposed plans and programs, pointing out deficiencies, and even saying something's not appropriate and why. Such a role can have enormous value for creating discussion, thinking beyond the obvious and the emotional.

Would the history of retailer J.C. Penney Co. be any different if its board had sought the views of marketing profes-



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sionals and others before draining the company coffers of \$170 million in acquiring a new management team and \$1 billion on making merchandising changes?

If a company doesn't value its marketers' independence, it should be prepared to make unnecessary and costly mistakes.

> **Have a clear picture of what you're doing.** In a recent Psychology Today article, Sam Gosling, Ph.D., a personality/social psychologist at the University of Texas, Austin, said there are some things about ourselves that we see quite clearly, such as judging our own self-esteem, optimism and pessimism. But when it comes to other things in which we're heavily invested, such as intelligence, attractiveness and body language, we have a lot of blind spots.

It's the same for companies. They not only know what they do well but they can become overly enamored with their excellence. In other words, companies can fall in love with themselves. Kodak is a good example. It saw itself as the premier film company—and it was. Even when digital photography was decimating its film sales, management failed to permit change. The myopia even extended to the company's valuation of its vaunted patents. Kodak's ignominious fate is the story of a company that loved itself to death.

There are others. Dell could be one. BlackBerry may be another. And there are countless smaller businesses that fail to understand that such self-love is misplaced and dangerous, and is quite different from loving your customers.

Companies, like people, can become so preoccupied with themselves that they fail to see themselves as they are.

When you think about it, getting the most from your company's marketing has less to do with ads, sponsorships, events, websites and press releases than it does with applying the analytical capabilities and insights of marketers to a company's basic business issues. ■

John Graham of GrahamComm is a marketing and sales consultant and business writer. Contact him at johnrg31@me.com.

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Dave Wolf, chief executive officer/general manager of Gardonville Cooperative Telephone, and Daphne Karpan, Knute Nelson palliative care manager, test out the GrandCare System.



Gardonville Telephone: Committed to Connecting Seniors to Care Providers

By Tennille Shields, NTCA Senior Writer/Editor

Caring for a loved one who is facing end of life is a difficult situation for all parties involved. Time or geographic constraints can sometimes prevent family members from being physically present, but modern technology is changing the way the nation looks at quality health care.

Knute Nelson, a nonprofit, Christian-based organization that specializes in senior care, has teamed up with local telecommunications providers such as Gardonville Cooperative Telephone Association (Brandon, Minn.) to offer an in-home technology solution that connects seniors and Hospice patients with their loved ones, caregivers and medical team.

Through the use of the GrandCare System, a simple touch platform enables in-home residents to view pictures, receive incoming messages, watch videos, listen to music and video chat with family. The system uses a variety of wireless activity and telehealth devices that also can alert designated caregivers by phone, email or text message if anything seems amiss.

Daphne Karpan, Knute Nelson palliative care manager, said the system has been particularly helpful and beneficial to the health-care organization's Hospice  40

Triangle Communications Issues Community Challenge

By Tennille Shields, NTCA Senior Writer/Editor

All it takes sometimes is a conversation to plant a seed and start a movement. In the case of Triangle Communications (Havre, Mont.), that seed was an industry conference on broadband and economic development that led the company earlier this year to issue a Connected Community Challenge aimed at local business leaders. The initiative was designed to generate a discussion on the role of broadband in rural Montana.

Anne Boothe, economic development specialist with Triangle Communications, said the idea came about after she attended a conference and realized how technologically fortunate rural Montanans are. "There's always been tremendous buzz surrounding the Gigabit Challenges and data centers in urban areas," she said. "But people don't  41



Gardonville Telephone

from page 39

clients, who generally have a one- to nine-month life expectancy. Being able to connect them with their loved ones at such a critical time has been a rewarding experience for all parties involved, she said.

Karpan noted that Knute Nelson is only able to offer this service through the support of a Blandin Foundation grant. The private foundation is the state's largest rural-based, rural-focused foundation that seeks to strengthen communities in rural Minnesota.

Testing Out Telehealth Services

The GrandCare System requires an Internet connection to work. Because most of the affected patients are not existing customers, Dave Wolf, chief executive officer/general manager of Gardonville Cooperative Telephone, said that his team makes it a top priority to install the low-cost broadband connection "without a bunch of red tape."

Karpan said hospice nurses are able to work with clients to set up Skype sessions and to upload pictures for families to share. In addition, the device can be programmed to monitor vital signs and activity. There are also sensors to alert caregivers if someone falls or needs to take their medicine.

"We have been proactively redefining the health-care paradigm over the last decade and have found great value in how technology helps to enrich the lives of our patients. With GrandCare, patients are able to become more involved in their own health care, stay living in their homes, and be connected to families and friends in meaningful ways," said Mark Anderson, president/chief execu-



Telehealth services are allowing sick patients to stay in their homes longer.

tive officer of Knute Nelson. "Partners and leaders in the field such as Dave Wolf ... understand the value in delivering this technology. Making it available to their customers helps to spur economic development and vitality in our region—and, most importantly, adds significant value in the lives of our patients."

Doing the Right Thing

Reflecting on the decision to partner with Knute Nelson on this initiative, Wolf said it was an easy decision to make despite the fact that it's not a revenue generator. "These people are facing end-of-life," he said. "It would require a one- to three-year triple-play package in order to break even at best. Everyone—the patient and their family members—is grateful and becomes loyal to the co-op for providing this service.

"There are 100 economic reasons not to get involved ... but we have the means and the network already in place," he said, explaining that Gardonville Cooperative Telephone is promoting the service as a low-speed data package that runs on 1 Mbps and doesn't require those in home care or Hospice to sign a contract.

"Not everything has to be a slam-dunk," Wolf said. "In this case, loyalty is a measurable outcome." ☰

Triangle Communications *from page 39*

realize the tremendous assets we have right here in rural Montana.”

Triangle Communications offered two, one-time \$2,500 grants as incentive to get community partners to sit down and talk about broadband technology and its role in economic development. According to the program rules, the awards can be used to cover some of the costs associated with hosting a technology fair or conference; marketing that promotes broadband connectivity using digital media or community signage; expanded public access and computer centers; digital literacy opportunities and technology use for business and community members; or other locally identified actions.

On March 19, the company announced the winners of the challenge: Harlem Civic Association, which plans to provide opportunities to improve technology knowledge and broadband access to residents of the Harlem/Ft. Belknap areas; and the Meagher County Chamber of Commerce, which plans to convene a group and identify ways to better utilize the technology that exists in the community to expand into new areas that will improve economic opportunities.

Over a three-month period, the winning organizations will work with Boothe to complete the four components of the Connected Community Challenge:

1. Establishing a cross-sector stakeholder committee.
2. Conducting an inventory of the community's assets (e.g., Wi-Fi hotspots, public community centers, community websites, etc.).
3. Holding one or more roundtable meetings with the stakeholder committee to discuss technology

Triangle Communications is committed to meeting the technology needs of the communities it serves.



assets and how they relate to economic development, government, health care services and social connections.

4) Developing a written broadband action plan that includes priorities and strategies that use broadband technologies to enable economic development.

“I just want them to have the conversation,” Boothe said, explaining the process and expected outcomes. “These community leaders have more in their communities than some urban areas in Montana, and they need to acknowledge that and promote it to get people to relocate here. ... Some people just don't understand the value of fiber and broadband. It's already here. We just need people to realize how to use it.”

Looking to the future, Boothe acknowledged that the one-time award isn't enough to sustain a movement, but noted that “the \$2,500 is just a carrot to get their attention.” Her hope is that the recipients of this year's challenge grant will keep the momentum going and perhaps apply to become an NTCA Smart Rural Community (www.ntca.org/smart) next year. ☰

SHARE YOUR STORY

NTCA–The Rural Broadband Association seeks to spotlight the efforts of member companies across the country. Exchange is a great place to share your company's success stories on economic development, community outreach, technology rollouts, and state and regional collaborative projects. To share your story, contact **Tennille Shields**, NTCA senior writer/editor, at **703-351-2097** or **tshields@ntca.org**.

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In this department, NTCA—The Rural Broadband Association periodically spotlights an associate member, defined as a supplier of goods and services to the communications industry. For a comprehensive listing of associate members, check out the NTCA membership directory, or click on “Rural Telecom Solution Providers” at www.ntca.org.

*Responses submitted by Dan Caldwell,
President of Consortia Consulting*

1. How long has your company been in existence?

Consortia Consulting has been supporting the regulatory, financial and managerial needs of rural communications providers since 1991. We are proud to be an employee-owned company with a staff that has consistently grown in expertise and experience to meet the ever-changing needs of our clients.

2. What are your core areas of business?

In addition to providing communications consulting basics (i.e., cost studies, tariffs and regulatory compliance assistance), Consortia has extensive experience in the development of federal and state regulatory policy positions. We pride ourselves on making sure that we create a voice for our clients, not ourselves, and most often work behind the scenes to add strength and depth to our client's policy messages.

Consortia is also active in strategic planning, industry-issues education, customized financial analysis and human resource support services. In 2007, Consortia established and now annually hosts Connections, a unique conference designed specifically for women in the rural communications industry.

3. How has your company adjusted to recent changes in the industry?

Clearly, the FCC reforms of the past few years have made long-term planning more challenging. We are very active in making sure our clients understand the changes and potential effects that are ahead, and we are working with them to adjust their operations as necessary to sustain their historical success. At the same time, we encourage active client participation in industry advocacy processes. We see those efforts as critically important to creating a bright future.

4. In what ways will your company (and staff) evolve to address your customers' changing needs?

Consortia is focused on identifying and developing the attributes of a successful and sustainable business model for our clients. While regulations will certainly continue to evolve and attempt to catch up with technology, the underlying value that rural communications providers represent is not going to change.

Historically, the business model has been driven by the provisioning of end-user services such as voice, Internet and video. We believe the future model for our clients is selling their powerful IP network connection. From a regulatory perspective, the future model has more “utility” characteristics than retail service characteristics. Our goal is to help our clients get to a model that recognizes and monetizes the unquestionable value that access to robust rural networks represents to both local consumers and the vast number of other network users.

5. Complete this sentence: In five years, I see Consortia Consulting ...

... continuing to represent the interests of rural communications companies. We believe the reports of the rural communications industry's death have been greatly exaggerated. Consortia believes that rural carriers represent the best of what the communications industry has to offer consumers. Consortia believes in the willingness of rural communications providers to out-work, out-invest and out-perform larger urban-centric carriers. Consortia believes that someday regulators will recognize these incredible values as well. Telecommunications technology has been evolving since Alexander Graham Bell called for Dr. Watson, and it will evolve again tomorrow. But rural values are steadfast and timeless. Consortia is betting on a successful future for the rural communications industry. ☐

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It's your town. It's our goal.

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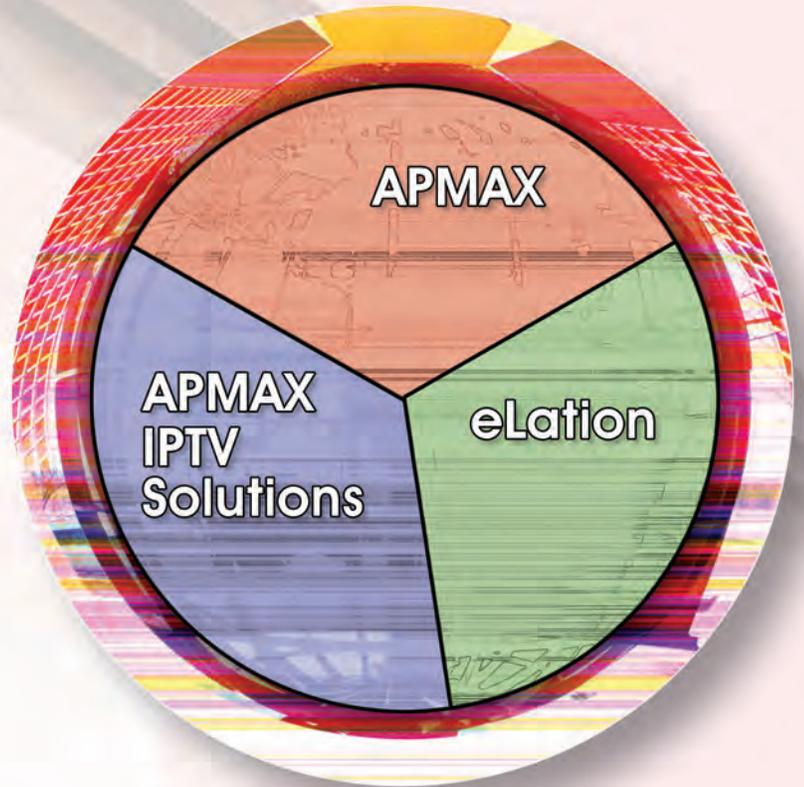
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