

The Magazine
of Rural Telco
Management

NOVEMBER - DECEMBER 2015

REBRANDING as You Move Toward a Broadband Future



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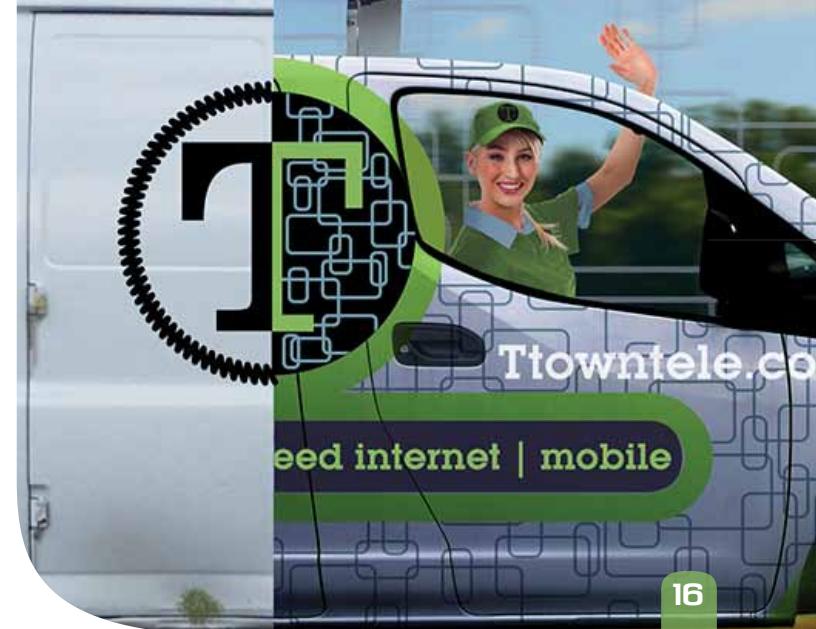
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Associate Member Spotlight:

National Information Solutions

Cooperative (NISC)



Rebranding as You Move Toward a Broadband Future

By Alison Gillespie

Rebranding doesn't just mean a new name.

Externally, it can mean reassuring your customers and enticing them to stick around as you grow. Internally, it can demand a new

approach to customer service and staff management. Learn about the challenges telcos have faced as they've changed their brands to better fit a broadband future.

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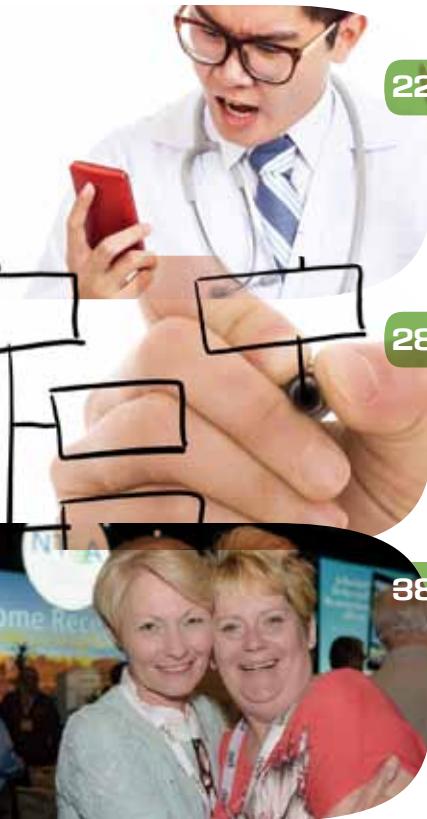
NTCA's Mission:

NTCA—The Rural Broadband Association, an association of small, rural, community-based communications providers, is dedicated to improving the quality of life in rural communities through the advocacy of broadband and other advanced communications infrastructure and services.

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.



Features



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Are Your Calls Going Through? A Call Completion Update

By Tennille Shields

For years, rural America has been plagued by a call completion epidemic in which phone calls simply aren't connecting. Those that do get through are often of poor quality. If the problem comes down to some providers using least-cost routers to save a few bucks at the expense of rural America, what's the solution?

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Innovation and the P3P Mindset

By Jonathan Crawford

An organization's mission statement doesn't always incorporate innovation as a formula for success. For telecom providers, the key is to maintain the P3P mindset: prioritize your plant, people and processes. Hear from telcos that have implemented this mindset, and the positive changes they have seen as a result.

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Warm Up in Orlando and Learn to Create Next-Gen Connections

By Lia Moore

The Rural Telecom Industry Meeting & EXPO '16 provides the strategies and information you need to create and advance your next-generation network. Learn about gigabit Internet, mobile apps and metered bandwidth, not to mention what's next in telecom policy.

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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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Rebranding With a Little Help

One of my favorite things about my job is sharing how a member company has tackled a challenge with another company that can learn from it. We do that a lot in the pages of this magazine, but it's rare to find synergies in real life, when the stars align to put two people with similar challenges in the same place at the same time.

I had one such experience recently, when a conversation with a general manager at a telco in Tennessee that is starting a company rebranding project led to another conversation with a telco that just finished overhauling its corporate image. Within hours, I was able to

connect the two managers by email and create a new conversation about what worked, what didn't, and how to strike a balance between showing appreciation and respect for the company's history while also presenting a fresh face to the world.

In today's 24/7, "always on" business climate, we are all challenged to keep our brands fresh so our custom-

ers continue to tune in to what we have to offer. The good news is there are ample opportunities to learn from others in the telecom industry that have walked this path already—as you'll learn in this issue's cover story. Sometimes a bold new color makes all the difference—as was the case for one of the companies we profile, YK Communications (Ganado, Texas). Sometimes it's a refreshed logo that provides a nod to the company's past that is the key to its success.

While no rebranding effort will be exactly like another, common challenges make good conversation starters, and sharing these challenges—and how they were overcome—with others is a rewarding part of what we do.

Laura Withers
Director of Communications
lwithers@ntca.org



Management Means Complaints, Complications—and Optimism

My dad retired this year after a career spent as a property manager. Day after day he fielded calls from condo boards and home owners asking what he would do to address whatever problem had surfaced: a broken pipe, snow removal, bad tenants—any of the myriad of things that go wrong when you deal with people who live in, and own, a residence.

After a day at the office, he'd come home for dinner and a little R&R before taking a shower, changing his clothes and heading out most nights of the week to property-management meetings.

There he'd listen to the concerns of those who had hired him, and would try to give them peace of mind that any actual or potential problems would soon be fixed.

He'd return home late at night, but he knew those meetings—hearing in person from the people to whom he was responsible as a manager—were the heart of what he did for a living.

Management isn't glamorous, but it's also a necessary function across all industries. This issue of Rural

Telecom focuses on business management and operations, with a cover story on something fundamental: rebranding as you move toward a broadband future. It's an optimistic piece about the industry's evolution.

But day-to-day management also involves complaints and complications about basic services. You know full well about the rural call completion problem, so you should also know what NTCA has been doing to address the problem. Check out Tennille Shields' story to see the actions we've taken, and to learn how member telcos have addressed this crucial aspect of their business.

In this issue you'll also find out how to innovate by focusing on plant, people and processes, and you'll learn all about NTCA's upcoming Rural Telecom Industry Meeting and EXPO in Lake Buena Vista, Fla.

Whether your day is just getting under way or wrapping up, take some time to explore the contents of this issue of Rural Telecom. I know you'll find something to help your business operate more efficiently.



TIG
AD
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PLEASE CUT

Christian Hamaker
Editor, Rural Telecom
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ARE YOU FED UP WITH YOUR INTERNET AND CABLE PROVIDER?

According to the American Consumer Satisfaction Index, America's most hated industries are the postal service, wireless carriers, airlines, and finally, Internet providers and TV companies.

Two years ago, Internet and pay-for-TV companies were ranked last and second last, respectively, but their scores have dropped further since then.

Claes Fornell, the index's founder, said that consumers are fed up with the business models in those industries, but warned that going wireless is not the solution. The combined cost of streaming apps and individual channels could actually result in higher costs.

►Source: washingtonpost.com/blogs/the-switch

Cord Project Inc. Gets People Talking

The Cord Project released its free voice-messaging service last December, and it has been a great success, both in the United States and abroad.

The service has the ability to send group messages, but it seems that its most significant use is to wish loved ones a happy holiday. On Valentine's Day, Cord Project saw a 40% increase in sent messages, with similar spikes on New Year's Day and Thanksgiving.

►Source: cordproject.co



Doctors on 'Digital Drugs'

Research shows that doctors are getting pretty distracted by video games on their smartphones.

A survey revealed that 68% of Americans report getting distracted by social media apps while at work. For some reason, though, doctors are more inclined to play video games than check Facebook. Forty-three percent of medical professionals surveyed attest to this.

►Source: theweek.com



Rural Areas Bolster Netflix DVD Sales

While many communities are making strides toward better and faster broadband service, Netflix reports that rural customers still make up the bulk of those who rent DVDs instead of streaming content. Even with DVD rentals down tremendously from their peak at 20 million in 2010, Netflix wants to hold on to these rentals, and continues to implement new technology to make DVDs accessible to customers.

"If you cut back on service, you are going to lose your subscriber base," said Hank Breeggemann, the general manager of the company's DVD division. "Expect us to continue to ship DVDs for the foreseeable future."

►Source: nytimes.com



TV Blackouts Do Nothing to Increase Ticket Sales

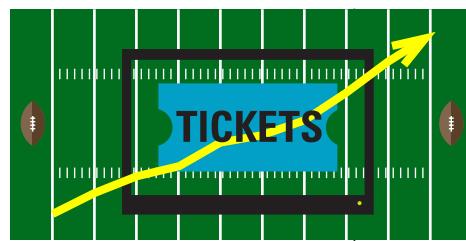
The practice of "blacking out" major sporting events unless the stadium is sold out does nothing to increase ticket sales, according to professional research.

The concept of a blackout is simple: If the game or event isn't selling out, then it won't be aired on TV. The idea is that this will motivate people to buy tickets and actually attend events, rather than staying at home to watch while stadium seats stay empty.

The NFL used this policy until 2012, when the FCC retracted its support for the blackout rule. Now, football is the only sport to air most of its games on free TV stations, and consequently, is one of the most popular sports in America. Football games regularly sell out stadiums.

Many sports fans find blackouts of local teams annoying rather than motivational, and hope that other sports will follow the NFL's lead.

►Source: psmag.com



CREATIVITY IS A STATE OF MIND

Some people think creativity is simply an inborn trait, but new research shows that creativity is more than a facet of personality.

University of California psychologists noted that there are two approaches to creativity: sudden bursts of inspiration, and the long process of trial and error to invent an innovative solution to problems. In experiments, they asked participants questions to determine personality types and assess creative output.

They found that all types of people can be creative, given that they are using a creative style that suits their personality.

►Source: fastcompany.com

Technology Defined (Back in 2003)

A review of how people talked about technology 12 years ago shows just how much things have changed. Adrienne LaFrance reminds us of how the Associated Press Stylebook defined various terms in an era before Facebook, YouTube and Google.

> **blog:** Internet jargon; if used, explain that it means web log or web journal.

> **Browser:** Software that enables personal computer users to navigate the World Wide Web and to perform various operations once they're linked with a site. The two most often used are Netscape Navigator and Microsoft Internet Explorer.

> **Cyberspace:** A term popularized by William Gibson in the novel "Neuromancer" to refer to the digital world of computer networks. It has spawned numerous words with cyber- prefixes, but try to avoid most of these cutesy coinages.

> **dot-com:** An informal adjective describing companies that do business mainly on the Internet.

> **DVD:** Acronym for digital video disk (or digital versatile disk). ... The acronym is acceptable in most stories, but spell out somewhere in a story in which the context may not be familiar to readers.

> **Emoticon:** A typographical cartoon or symbol generally used to indicate mood or appearance, as :-) and often looked at sideways. Also known as smileys.

►Source: atlantic.com

How Entertainment Has Changed

Dana Jennings of the New York Times reflected on the television of her childhood and how it differs from media today.

Television today is faster, cleaner, and more reliable than in the past. There is infinitely more variety, and accessibility is a simple matter of the right package, or the right app, or even the right website. Not to mention the fact that crystal clear picture and HD are almost becoming requirements for a viewing experience. Jennings believes that this is not all a positive development.

"We not only demand our television, radio and music in unblemished HD on whatever device we choose," said Jennings, "but also our weddings, children, houses and bodies."

Jennings also said that the world of on-demand entertainment dulls the excitement of things, likening it to the reason vinyl has made a comeback in recent years. In her childhood, nothing was wireless, and the "human touch" was required for functioning devices. Nostalgia for imperfection is fueling the resurgence of previously irrelevant devices.

►Source: nytimes.com



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@FRSRuralConnect
#PRTC shows #FRS visiting congressional tour staffers fiber vs. copper. #ruraliscool



@TomWheelerFCC

"Simply put, in the 21st century access to broadband is access to opportunity."

My remarks to
@NTCAconnect: <http://go.usa.gov/3tbne>
#NTCAFC



@TechnoShawn

Hey, check this out. A blurb about our Arrowhead partnership RT
@NTCAconnect: telco-electric utility partnerships



@aunt_allison

@NTCAconnect members, like H&B Communications, serve 40% of U.S. Landmass with broadband? Who knew!
#ruraliscool
#neighborsservingneighbors



@TylerCampbellKY

Just launched @KTAOffice on #Twitter. Follow @KTAOffice for updates on rural #telecom #broadband in Kentucky.



@gregoryahale
@mikeofcc

@NTCAconnect Thanks for taking the time to come! We appreciate your willingness to learn more about rural challenges!

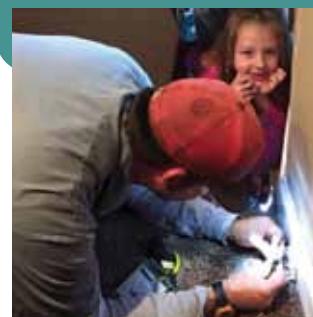


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It was an honor to speak @NTCAconnect fall conference in Boston! #ntcafc #ruraliscool



Tanya Welstad, SRT Communications customer A shout out to Teri at SRT! You answered every Wi-Fi question this little 5-year-old had for you with a BIG SMILE! Thank you!



GVNW
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Connections

BY SHIRLEY BLOOMFIELD

Got Gig? We Do.

As more than 1,600 members of NTCA—The Rural Broadband Association gathered in Boston, Mass., for our annual Fall Conference in September, I had the distinct honor of recognizing 23 member companies that were named Certified Gig-Capable Providers in the first month of a national program we launched highlighting independent telecommunications providers delivering gigabit broadband speeds. Since the meeting, at least 10 more companies have received the national recognition, and I couldn't be more proud of each one.

As Certified Gig-Capable Providers, these companies build awareness and industry recognition of community-based telecom providers that have built communications networks capable of delivering Internet speeds of up to 1 Gbps, which is 100 times faster than those currently available in many U.S. households.

To achieve certification, companies must show that gigabit technology is currently commercially available within 95% of one or more exchanges within their serving territory and that such service can be provided without new trenching or stringing new aerial facilities. This statement must be confirmed by a letter from an engineering firm or other independent source involved in the company's network planning, deployment or operation.

The word is already spreading. In his address at our Fall Conference, FCC Chairman Tom Wheeler cited the economic development and advancements spurred in these communities through access to broadband services. He said he was particularly pleased to see that we have created a program to highlight independent providers delivering gigabit broadband speeds, and he gave special recognition to companies like NineStar Connect in Greenfield, Indiana; Polar Communications in Park River, North Dakota and Premier Communications in Sioux Center, Iowa, which were some of our first certified companies.

It is with this recognition program and the others NTCA provides—including the Smart Rural Community Showcase Awards that just recognized 12 new communities for their work in distance learning, telehealth services, public safety and security—that we can shine a spotlight on the great work being done by NTCA members and remind lawmakers,



regulators, industry stakeholders and consumers across the country that you have been moving rural communities forward for decades. The rural markets you serve now rely on you not only to meet today's demand for modern telecommunications technology but to plan for the future so that rural communities are not left behind. Without you, many of these hard-to-serve rural markets would not have access to essential telecommunications services.

I applaud each one of you for your commitment to delivering the Internet's fastest speeds—an accomplishment worthy of much praise considering the unique and challenging circumstances small, community-based telecommunications providers operate under every day. By building gigabit-capable networks, these recognized companies have not only overcome the challenges each of you face, but also shattered conventional benchmarks for broadband speed to enable cutting-edge technologies that drive innovation and promote economic development in their communities, regions and the nation. A full list of certified companies is available at ntca.org/gigcertified.

Shirley Bloomfield is chief executive officer of NTCA—The Rural Broadband Association. She can be reached at sbloomfield@ntca.org. You can also follow her blog at ntca.org/ceoblog.

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Perspective

BY ERIC CARSTENSON

Commissioner Pai's Perspective—and Ours in Nebraska

When Nebraska U.S. Sen. Deb Fischer hosted FCC Commissioner Ajit Pai in Nebraska last June to learn about the innovative telecommunications activities here, Pai added his own innovative thinking and ideas to the record that has been developed by other commissioners and the FCC staff regarding a standalone broadband Universal Service Fund (USF) approach for rural rate-of-return carriers, many serving the most remote areas of Nebraska.

That Pai presented these ideas during his trip to Nebraska is indicative of the relevance of our state's elected representatives' and telecommunications industry's contributions to the development and advocacy of sound USF public policies, both at the federal and state levels. I know I'm biased, but it is accurate to say Nebraska has been a leader both in working with the FCC on telecommunications issues and especially in adopting and implementing the Nebraska Universal Service Fund (NUSF).

The Nebraska NUSF was established to enable companies to build and operate high-capacity voice and data networks. It was made possible over two decades ago because of the vision of the only one-house, nonpartisan legislative body in the nation. As a state senator, Deb Fischer helped continue the strong support for the NUSF as it evolves into a broadband-centric mechanism administered by the Nebraska Public Service Commission.

The elected commission continues to proactively manage and innovate the NUSF to ensure continued long-term support for carriers to make investments to serve all customers in the state as required by the state's 1997 Nebraska Universal Service Fund Act. It is noteworthy that policies that have been in place with the NUSF are now under consideration or already implemented by the FCC to the federal USF. Among them: Requiring accountability from recipient companies, providing grants to deploy broadband, capping allowable company expenses, implementing retail rate benchmarks, and using a model for determining investments and other costs.

We are encouraged by the hard work of the FCC and the rural industry to follow up the implementation of Connect America Fund (CAF) model support in price-cap carrier areas with the potential offer of model support to rate-of-return carriers. There are Nebraska companies that sup-

port the transition to the CAF model and are interested in the predictability that the CAF model will bring where currently there is not sufficient predictability.

At the same time, there are small companies for whom the model does not work. For these carriers, it is important to consider what can be done to update the existing USF mechanisms such that they are able to invest in broadband-capable networks and recover the costs of delivering broadband to consumers. To address this, as evidenced in Commissioner Pai's announcement in Nebraska, the FCC is also actively involved in developing a standalone broadband mechanism for companies that do not elect to move to a model. We urge swift adoption of these measures.

The FCC and the Nebraska commission are at critical crossroads in telecommunications policy history. Both recognize the absolute necessity of incenting deployment of scalable broadband services for unserved areas in order to meet customers' demands for increased speeds and capacity. The Nebraska commission has also commenced a proceeding considering modifications to the NUSF contributions mechanism, a critically important action to ensure the long-term viability of the NUSF. It is widely held that the existing federal and state contributions mechanisms are not sustainable and do not reflect customers' shift to broadband. Let's hope that the FCC similarly prioritizes contributions reform for the federal USF.

The FCC has repeatedly said that universal service for broadband is a joint federal-state partnership. As the preceding comments confirm, in Nebraska we take our side of this partnership seriously. ■

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Eric Carstenson is president of the Nebraska Telecommunications Association. Contact him at ntz-eric@navix.net.

BEC
AD
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REBRANDING



as You Move Toward a Broadband Future



BY ALISON GILLESPIE

The long-running trend of telephone companies transforming into telecommunications companies has evolved into telecom companies transforming into technology companies. As more telcos add services like broadband, television and Internet access to their slates, the transformation can involve a great deal of change in hardware and equipment. Even so, many rural companies report that the hardest transformations are those behind the scenes. Rebranding doesn't just mean a new name. Externally, it can mean reassuring your customers and enticing them to stick around as you grow. Internally, it can demand a new approach to customer service and staff management.

YK Communications (Ganado, Texas) provides a good example. The telco has evolved since its 1948 founding as a rural cooperative telephone company. By 2014, it was offering many newer services to more than 3,000 residents and businesses in and around a tiny town tucked next to the Gulf of Mexico.

But customers were increasingly left confused by their interactions with the staff. Ganado Telephone Co. still handled telephone service, while other things were offered through its new subsidiary, YK Communications. Salespeople might come to give estimates and leave business cards from Ganado Telephone, but the first bill would arrive for customers with the name YK Communications printed across the top.



The company had developed a split identity.

"We physically had two buildings that were connected on the back end," said Russell Kacer, president of the company. "We'd send them to this department for phone service and then basically say, 'Oh, by the way, go out this door, hang a left and go into the next door. They're going to take care of your broadband Internet or your DirecTV or your security or anything like that.' It created this very disconnected experience."

Kacer is the son of one of the company's founders. As a toddler, he played in a playpen in the mapping room of the back office. "I joke that I've got copper wire running through my veins, which I guess now I should upgrade to fiber optics. It was just a natural thing for me to come back and be a part of the business."



Returning to the company as an adult after working in a large metropolitan area, Kacer could see the organizational problems with fresh eyes. He also knew which changes had to happen to keep the organization vibrant and strong. What's more, an aggressive cable company had moved in, and the entire service area had become surrounded by AT&T, so customers were used to that company's polished marketing pieces, even if they couldn't use AT&T's services in their own homes. Many began asking for more options. In 2014 the company decided that it would fully rebrand itself as YK Communications.

"We had kind of reached the point where it was like, if we are going to rock the boat, let's just flip it over," Kacer said.

To start with, the company's building was renovated,

and the door that had previously led to Ganado Telephone Co. was sealed off, giving customers a single entrance, complete with a showroom for all of the telco's products and services.

Tough Culture Change

The YK Communications staff was also asked to make a culture shift that proved more challenging than any brick-and-mortar work. Although some employees embraced their new roles, others who had previously handled customer questions were not used to having to cross-sell, upsell or do any kind of selling of services.

"I realized that the best thing I could do was capitalize on where everyone had their strong skills," Kacer said.

Those who proved good at selling and helping customers feel at ease and navigate choices stayed in the customer service role. On the flip side, there were



former telco employees who were good at understanding the nitty-gritty aspects of customer fees. "So we let them be the back side of the office, the billing and processing," he said.

Lifelong Residents

The population of Ganado, 100 miles south of Houston, hasn't changed much. Most of the customer base still comes from lifelong residents of the town. But today some of the local businesses are able to thrive via the Internet. There's a small specialty Westernwear business in town, for example, that relies upon online customers to provide more than 90% of its yearly sales, and a local photographer who counts upon quick upload speeds when posting proofs for clients.

"It's exciting for a little company like ours to be a success story and to know that we're a part of that as their broadband provider," Kacer said.

Similar Change, Different Reasons

Six hundred miles to the north, BTC Broadband (Bixby, Okla.) went through a similar transformation over the last few years but for very different reasons. The company had once been set in a quiet, rural area. But as Tulsa's metropolitan area continued to expand, a large number of new residents brought increased expectations for Internet, telephone and television services.

"Some of the longer-term customers are not necessarily the early adopters who demand the highest speed of the Internet," BTC Broadband President Scott Floyd said. "Almost exclusively the people moving in are just the opposite. They are the very demanding customers who expect to have the fastest speeds and the best technology."

Previous tech upgrades had been done in bits and pieces, and had left things a bit "disjointed," Floyd



said. Ten years ago, there were some services "kind of on the side" while telephone remained the central mission of the company. Eventually the decision was made to focus on broadband, and infrastructure upgrades were made accordingly.

The changes "turned us into a nimble, aggressive and well-respected entity in our community and our region," Floyd said. But those changes took time.

An internal marketing team came up with the new moniker, morphing the telco from Bixby Telephone Co. into BTC Broadband. Now, longtime residents see BTC and think "Bixby Telephone Co.," while the newest arrivals see the word "broadband" and know what to expect. "If it still said Bixby Telephone Co., they [the newer residents]

might think it was limited or it was owned by the city or maybe didn't have as much capability," Floyd said.

The company also began using a new mascot—a fuzzy cow whose demeanor can change from serious to sassy depending upon marketing needs. Customers are invited via Facebook to like the BTC cow or answer questions and read community bulletins from her. The landing page of the website even includes her picture.

Internally, a mindset change had to take place, Floyd said. "You have to go after this business and you have to actively go out and sell it and sell yourself, as opposed to sitting back and receiving orders like you normally would in the environment where you are the monopoly or the stalwart that had been there all along," Floyd said.

There was some resistance at first—"It was a cultural change for us," he said—but now people both inside and outside the company look back and see the evolution was inevitable because of growth in the community and the communications industry.



"Ten years ago everybody would say don't do it [don't change]," Floyd said. "And now everybody is assuming we're going to do it and they're on board and they're trying to figure out how to make it happen. And they're embracing the change rather than resisting it."

When Pulaski-White Rural Telephone Cooperative (Buffalo, Ind.) decided two years ago to change from a telephone-focused company to a broadband and cable television provider, it also underwent a massive philosophy shift, said Ashlee Siegle, the company's director of marketing and sales. Rebranding meant some external ➤

differences. The company's long name was simplified to a single word, LightStream. But the staff also shifted from emphasizing what the company had done in the past to what it could offer customers in the present and into the future.

There was some anxiety about this change. Board members wondered why the long written history of the company was no longer on the website, and a few customers did check in to make sure the cooperative serving their small rural community hadn't been bought out.

But mostly, people were excited about the possible upgrades and improvements.

"We wanted to stay future-focused. I believe our customers don't really care about the history. They want to know: What can you give me now and what can you give me in the future?" Siegle said.

Siegle also thinks that using an outside consulting firm, Plus One Strategic Communications, LLC (POSC; Arlington, Va.), was key to the smooth transition, encouraging the team

...allow at least a year to get all the pieces fully in place for both the tech upgrades and the company's image shift. First and foremost, employees need to be on board and educated about the changes because even in rural America, every customer has choices now.

in Buffalo to reach out to the community early in the process.

"We needed to partner with someone who had gone through these processes before and could truly mentor us," Siegle said.

Tanya Sullivan, president of POSC, cautioned that rebranding can take time and should be thought of as a marathon, not a sprint. At minimum, telcos

need to allow at least a year to get all the pieces fully in place for both the tech upgrades and the company's image shift. First and foremost, employees need to be on board and educated about the changes because even in rural America, every customer has choices now.

"These employees can't just be order takers anymore, they have to be part of a sales culture," Sullivan said. "That goes through construction all the way to the customer service rep."

Alison Gillespie is a freelance writer. Contact her at alison@alisongillespie.com.

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Are Your Calls Going Through?

A CALL COMPLETION UPDATE

BY TENNILLE SHIELDS

For more than three years, rural America has been plagued by a call completion epidemic in which phone calls simply aren't connecting. And those that do get through are often of poor quality, leaving both the caller and the recipient more than a little frustrated.

While the FCC has levied penalties against offending carriers and created some industrywide standards, the problem persists. Those affected say the occurrences seem to ebb and flow.

Hello? Hello? Hello? !

Folks in the rural broadband industry are quick to point out that the problem has nothing to do with technology—it all comes down to cost, and some providers using least-cost routers to save a few bucks at the expense of rural America. The solution, some believe, is to force these carriers to 1) register with the FCC; 2) adhere to call quality standards; and 3) pay up if they don't want to play by the rules.

The Saga Continues

Long-distance and wireless providers often contract with third-party least-cost routers that (eventually) connect calls to their destination at the lowest cost possible. All too often, those calls either fail to complete or have poor call quality.

"Some least-cost routers move traffic by pricing their services below the actual costs to deliver the calls, then people act surprised when calls are not completing," said Andy Brown, vice president of industry and client relations for ANPI (Springfield, Ill.)—a provider of hosted unified communications solutions.

Given that millions of phone calls are placed every day, the amount of calls that don't complete is fairly small. Still, he said, call completion can be crippling—and even devastating—to small businesses in rural areas.

"We've had businesses unable to receive calls," said Dave Duncan, chief executive officer of the Iowa Communications Alliance (Urbandale, Iowa). "Some companies are devising workarounds, including 1-800 numbers for some customers to call. Those companies had to increase the costs of routing by rerouting to more expensive options."

Hello? Hello? Hello?

Duncan explained that many rural telcos in Iowa have worked to educate customers about how calls are routed and how the problem lies on the originating carrier's side. "Customers don't care about that," he said. "They pay you to make calls and receive calls, so to them it's our fault even when it's not."

At Craigville Telephone Co. (Craigville, Ind.), General Manager Lee VonGunden has experienced the wrath of irate business customers threatening to move their services elsewhere. After noticing that an offending carrier was not terminating calls in Craigville Telephone's rural service territory, the company began porting numbers through its competitive local exchange carrier located in Fort Wayne, Ind., where the calls would terminate. "It was a lot of extra work for our technical guys to port the numbers to preserve our business customers," he said. ➤





Kim Harber, senior vice president of Madison Telephone Co. (Staunton, Ill.), said irritation from enterprise customers is by far the primary escalation the company receives. This includes rural businesses not being able to be reached by their paying customers and disturbing reports of public safety that affect rural health care providers.

"This issue is having devastating effects on rural economic sustainability and critical concerns of threats to public safety," he said. "Rural health care providers, patients and emergency personnel continue to report their inability to be contacted for the purposes of administering medical treatment. Those missed calls pose threats to life safety and are simply unacceptable."

The Fines

The FCC Enforcement Bureau ultimately levied more than \$9 million in fines and voluntary contributions from Verizon, Level 3 Communications, LLC, Windstream and Matrix Telecom, Inc.

Following persistent advocacy efforts led by NTCA-The Rural Broadband Association, the FCC launched an investigation into rural call completion. The agency adopted a rural call completion order in October 2013 that implemented new recordkeeping, retention and reporting requirements for long-distance and wireless carriers. Those rules took effect April 2015.

In addition, the FCC Enforcement Bureau ultimately levied more than \$9 million in fines and voluntary contributions from Verizon (\$5 million), Level 3 Communications, LLC (\$975,000), Windstream (\$2.5 million) and Matrix Telecom, Inc. (\$875,000).

While those fines initially seemed to give some pause to the shameful practices of the offending carriers, the problem didn't totally cease.

"We didn't see much difference in Iowa," Duncan said. "Some have promised to fix their routing tables. Things can improve as the carriers improve their routing practices and stop using least-cost routers. There are many more fly-by-night routers, and you get what you pay for."

At present, not all least-cost routers are registered with the FCC. Some estimate that there are hundreds of them, with new ones popping up nearly every day. When the commission is assessing fines, the offending carriers move further away from the action, said Randy Lemmo, executive vice president of strategic business at ANPI.

The way he sees it, the problem is all a matter of providers trying to pick up a few cents and using arbitrage routes to charge third parties. "Over the course of one or two weeks, you can pick up some significant money," he said. "They run the risk because the fine pales in comparison to paying the actual costs to route traffic appropriately."

Madison Telephone's Harber doesn't believe the fines have done much to resolve the issue. In fact, his investi-

gations have found that customers placing calls from the originating carriers are conditioned to believe that they just can't reach certain businesses and loved ones located in rural areas by calling legacy landlines.

"Although we provide education to our customers on this issue, we have found that many consumer complaints simply don't get escalated to us because the originating caller is outside our jurisdiction," he said.

Harber said customer frustrations are immense, and that customers are shifting their approach by using alternative options instead. Although the fines may have initially affected the consumer complaints, he said, they consistently resurface. "You don't know what you don't know, and we certainly don't know what LECs [local exchange carriers] do with the complaints and trouble tickets."

"We have done extensive research only to find the originating caller outside our jurisdiction is often told that there was 'No Trouble Found,'" he continued. "We have escalated these findings to the state and federal regulatory agencies that continue to address the call completion complaints. It's a Catch-22 when you are having to ask an originating caller outside our jurisdiction to file a complaint. They have been told by their service provider everything is operational."

This summer, VonGunten said Craigville Telephone experienced a flurry of consumer complaints regarding calls not completing. He said the telco immediately sent the FCC all the information it was able to gather about the calls.

"The FCC is poking at them enough that they are trying to fix the problem," he said. "The fines helped, but \$5 million may not really hurt Verizon. It created attention to the issue, but probably not enough. ... There's a need to put more pressure on all of the carriers."

An Act of Congress

In March 2015, Sens. Amy Klobuchar (D-Minn.) and Jon Tester (D-Mont.) introduced the Improving Rural Call Quality and Reliability Act, which directs the FCC to establish basic quality standards for providers that transmit voice calls to help prevent the discriminatory delivery of calls to any and all areas of our country. It also directs the agency to require those providers to register with the commission.

Separately, Reps. Bob Latta (R-Ohio) and Peter Welch (D-Vt.) reintroduced their call completion resolution, which states that no entity should unreasonably discriminate against telephone users in rural areas. It also encourages the commission to aggressively pursue entities that violate call completion rules and contribute to poor quality telecommunications service in rural areas.

Some believe these congressional mandates, coupled with enforcement, could make the difference.

"My focus is on resolution," said Harber. "Fines serve a purpose, but we need to get to the root cause of the" ➤

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"If businesses can afford to pay the fine to avoid the cost of terminating calls, there's no incentive to fix the call quality."

**—Kim Harber,
Madison Telephone Co.**

problem. We need regulatory enforcement on accurately reporting and measuring call quality, and we'll see better results. It's the obligation of the underlying carrier to produce metrics that accurately report call completion data.

"On the cost side," he continued, "I don't know what the fine should be. If businesses can afford to pay the fine to avoid the cost of terminating calls, there's no incentive to fix the call quality. We need to focus on solutions versus discussing the problem. A fine is appropriate, but it will not fix the problem. There needs to be a measurable impact and obligations for completing calls."

The Solution?

Most agreed that the problem has improved some since it first came to light. "It's fortunate and unfortunate," Craigville Telephone's VonGunten said. "As things have gotten better, the issue has moved from a top-level concern down the line. It's good that it's better, but when the issue arises, it's still very frustrating to the customer."

ANPI's Lemmo believes final resolution could be a year or two out. "Fines are a catalyst for changing the actions of interexchange carriers," he said.

He also stressed the importance of reporting requirements and setting parameters based on quality metrics. Speaking from experience, he explained that ANPI uses least-cost providers but holds them to strict quality standards. Those that don't adhere to the performance metrics are no longer used. ANPI uses a VAP (voice application peering), which is the migration to an IP-centralized switching environment that provides a direct connection with rural incumbent local exchange carriers for terminating traffic.

"I believe the industry needs a mechanism that ensures quality standards on voice calls that meet the very basic principle of 'equal access'—the ability of all customers to make and receive calls," Harber said. "Fines are certainly a deterrent as long as the fine is detrimental to the overall profitability of the underlying carrier. Quite frankly, if the cost savings associated with not completing calls to high-cost rural areas outweigh the cost of a fine, there is predictable risk in whether an underlying carrier will ensure seamless call quality and whether completion standards are maintained."

Iowa Communications Alliance's Duncan believes a solution has already been found. He reflected on an industry panel discussion last year during which an FCC official was asked point-blank: "If these originating carriers stop using least-cost routers, would the problem be resolved?" To which the official responded, "Yes, the problem could be resolved."

"The problem is enforcement," Duncan said. "As a state, we must look at voluntary industry standards. Violators must be assessed a financial penalty. They do it to save money, but they need to face a financial penalty to make them stop. The problem can be fixed."

While he was reluctant to name names, he noted that there is one large carrier in the state that has yet to have a single call completion complaint against it. "It must mean the company is engaged in proper routing practices. It can be done right," he said.

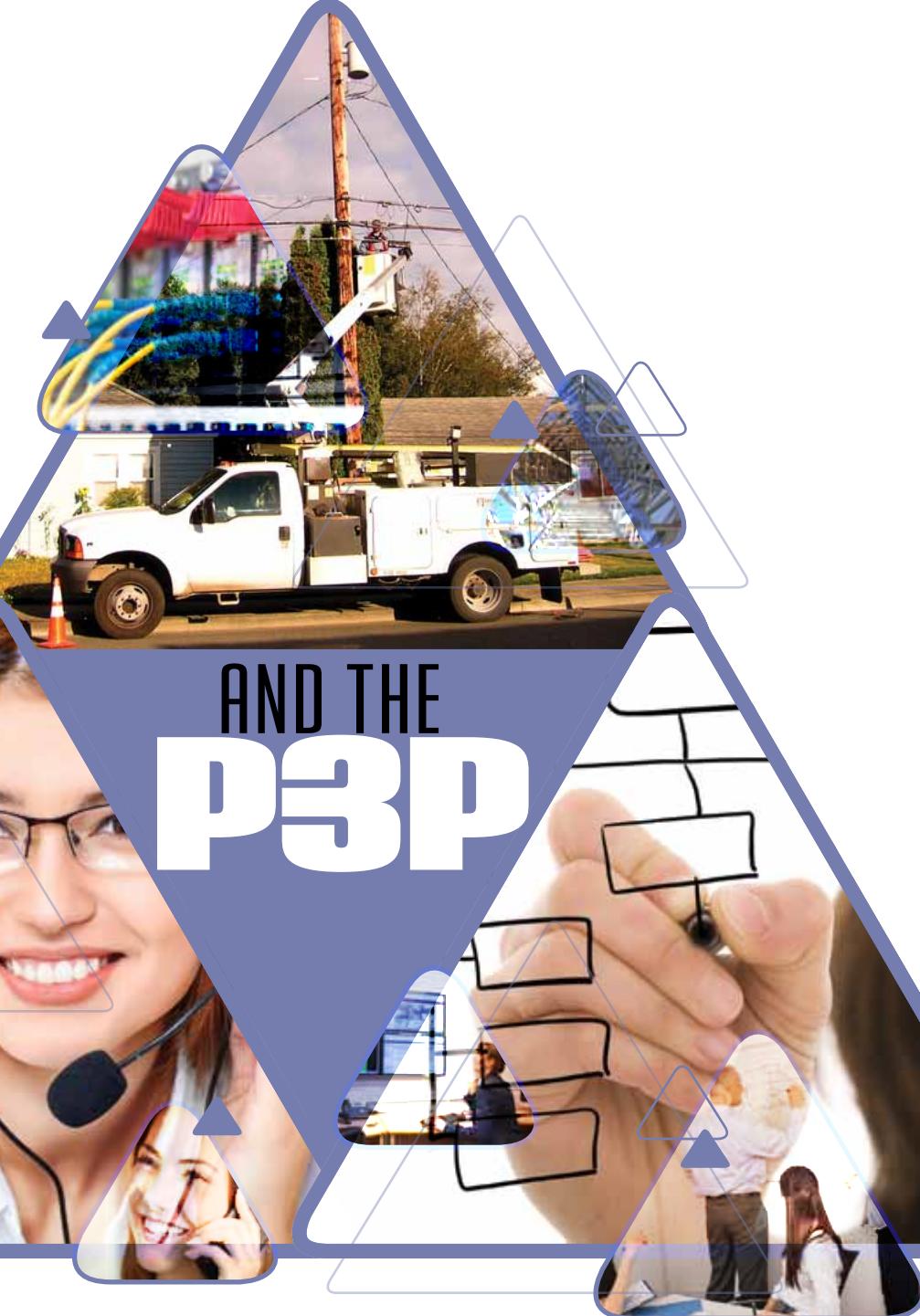
In the meantime, NTCA members and consumers and businesses located in rural America should continue to call on their state commissions, the FCC and members of Congress to address the call completion problem for good. Eventually, those least-cost routers will answer to them.

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INNOVATION



AND THE
P3P

► MINDSET ◀



RURAL TELCOS OFTEN ARE EXCLUDED FROM CONSIDERATION AS LEADING EDGE

communications service providers (CSPs). Battling complex geography, sparse populations and sprawling service areas, it seems like rural providers have many inherent disadvantages. But those same challenges mean rural telcos can innovate in surprising ways. Those innovations—and the success of any organization—depend on capitalizing on assets, recognizing opportunities and executing efficiently.

An organization's mission statement doesn't always incorporate "innovation" as a formula for success. For telecom providers, the key is to maintain the P3P mindset: prioritize your plant, people and processes.



It's up to rural telcos to stay current on technology trends. The plant needs to be maintained, updated and managed to yield as much value as possible.



The focus on people is twofold. First, get the right people on your team. Second, remember that the point of your company, at its very core, is to enrich the daily lives of your customers. With the right people focused on the customers you are serving, you can guarantee success.



Rural telcos tend to have more adverse conditions than their national competitors and need to find ways to counter those disadvantages. The processes you implement need to streamline workflows and maximize resources.

Armstrong Telephone Co. (Harrisville, W.Va.) found opportunities to boost efficiency by focusing on the people, plant and processes of its company. "The time spent with techs to provide subscriber locations, cable counts, load points, etc., are no longer issues," said Roger Riggs, OSP engineer at Armstrong. "Questions like pole ownership used to mean searching a number of files—now it's just a click. Many other tasks are no longer even considered tasks."





THE P3P MINDSET CAN HELP CREATE BRIDGES BETWEEN DEPARTMENTS, AS IT BRINGS EVERYONE TOGETHER WITH A UNIFIED VISION.

After redefining workflows with more automated solutions, the multilocation Armstrong saw these effects trickle all the way down to its customers. According to John Spencer, OSP engineer, "Customer outages and service issues are resolved in less time due to how quickly we can see what is in the plant that serves customers, resulting in less field troubleshooting."

It Starts With a 'C': Communication

To facilitate the P3P mindset within your organization, it's important to implement supporting solutions that encourage it. One of the biggest barriers to P3P is poor communication between departments. Commonly, CSPs manage complexities by breaking processes down into silos managed by separate divisions. However, this results in the creation of walls between departments and isolated silos of knowledge. The P3P mindset can help create bridges between departments, as it brings everyone together with a unified vision.

The sales and marketing division of a CSP is tasked with generating revenue from the investment the CSP has made in its plant. It is also vital that the CSP knows the people it serves and the potential prospects it should convert to customers. Given the challenges of its service areas, the CSP also needs efficient processes to stay up to date on customer and prospect information and to make sure other departments are up to date on the latest developments as well.

The tasks assigned to the operations division of a CSP can be as varied as engineering new plant deployments, construction services, service provisioning, service assurance or any ongoing operational function. Because operations has such a varied task list, it is even more vital to be organized, to minimize duplications of work and to communicate effectively with the rest of the organization.

The managers of CSPs have the monumental task of coordinating and aligning their divisions toward delivering high-quality, carrier-class communications services in some of the most challenging conditions imaginable. The P3P mindset is a common vision that will ensure that ongoing solutions to current challenges reinforce that alignment.

The Plant

First, prioritize the plant. The P3P mindset places the focus on the most important assets of a rural CSP. When the CSP knows what plant has been deployed, how that plant is performing and what potential value is left to be extracted from the plant, then it can quickly move on opportunities for new service connections from residents and businesses. The CSP can swiftly respond to events that impact service quality or service delivery and make the best use of its

limited personnel resources by reducing truck rolls and coordinating field technicians. Santa Rosa Telephone Cooperative (SRTC; Vernon, Texas) has optimized its available resources to make quick service offering determinations. By using a visual operations system to consolidate information from separate departments, customer service processes have been expedited. Mapping and OSP Engineering Supervisor Si Clark said, "The ability to easily determine the distance from the central office/node to the structure has made it easier to determine the services that customers qualify for." These quick determinations result in faster turn-around for SRTC's customers.

The People

Next, prioritize people. The good news is that the P3P mindset of putting people first is already a hallmark of most rural telcos: great customer service and employee relations. The CSP's relationship with its customers should always be a focus for all of its employees. But there are also community leaders, chambers of commerce, educational organizations and medical offices to which the rural telco should regularly be reaching out. The P3P mindset means moving beyond great customer experience and into the role of community advocate for technology services. Broadband Internet speeds are democratizing opportunities for education, medicine and businesses.

For an example of prioritizing people, look no further than Valley Telephone Cooperative, Inc. (VTCI; Raymondville, Texas). When you visit its website, you will notice the phrase, "Proud of our past ... embracing our future." With this mentality, VTCI is fully embracing its P3P identity. Established in 1952, the cooperative has witnessed many changes to the telecommunications industry. In fact, during its formation, residents of South Texas did not have phone service at all. VTCI believed that living in rural Texas shouldn't preclude residents from getting the communications services they deserve.

Even though the technology has changed, the telco's mindset has not. VTCI is continuously devoted to ensuring that its rural customers have top-of-the-line communications services. VTCI brought gigabit speeds to Brownsville and the Rio Grande Valley starting in 2012, connecting educational institutions and medical facilities across 7,300 square miles with 5,300 miles of fiber optic cable. Customers living in areas deemed as being "too rural to be profitable" by larger companies are now seeing advancements in telemedicine, education, agriculture and engineering as a result of increased high-speed connectivity. The returns for the Brownsville and Rio Grande Valley areas are

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immeasurable, as opportunities for better health care and education will continue to pay dividends for decades to come.

The Processes

Lastly, prioritize processes. The P3P mindset for processes is about doing tedious work (such as data entry) only one time and eliminating redundancy. It's also about automating as many steps in the business process as possible. The P3P mindset is about providing information to employees when they need it, in the format that they need it, and with as few clicks as possible. The process should expedite business functions and make them as repeatable and accurate as possible. As a result, costs to the organization in employee time, rework and correcting mistakes will be reduced over time.

"It used to be that if I had to plan a construction job, I would have to go out to the site," said Greg Welch of Hardy Telecommunications (Lost River, W.Va.). "I would take distances and measurements, look around at all the facilities that there were—what kind of poles were there, whether they were old or new—basically the condition of the area, and that might take a day or a half a day. Now, I can sit in here, in the office here, and maybe do it in an

hour." Welch, the OSP manager, spoke to the measurable impact of adjusting operational processes, which resulted in major time savings for Hardy.

A key to achieving the P3P mindset is the deployment of supporting technologies that accomplish a number of tasks. Information about plant needs to be accessible to multiple departments and as accurate as what really exists in the field. This used to mean a map room where each department could go to see what was built and where. Today, modern operations systems can bring the map to whatever mobile device an employee has; employees in engineering or technicians in the field can make changes and update in real time. This allows sales and marketing departments to proactively reach out to customers and prospects, while being armed with as much intelligence about the network as possible.

Another key enabler to achieving the P3P mindset is systematically rolling out automations to allow employees to take on more complex and higher value duties. Basic workforce software can take tasks from customer service representatives and automatically schedule them for technicians according to location, skill set and availability. Newly installed plant can automatically be provisioned and

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assigned so that operations can ensure services are being delivered and new customers get turned up more quickly.

Complementary to data access is increasing the speed that information flows across an organization. Access to plant, customers and prospect records is the first step. The next step is using that information in reports that managers and executives can use to improve operations, seize opportunities that arise and understand their domains better and better. Copper Valley Telephone Cooperative (Valdez, Alaska) Customer Service Supervisor Sheila Reiswig highlighted the value of automated tasks and consolidated workflows. "The ability to just look something up at your own desk without having to track someone down and interrupt their work makes for an easier flow of information," she said.

As the telcos mentioned have all demonstrated, a P3P mindset leads to many significant benefits, and the good news is most telcos are already well on their way toward the P3P mentality. With a little specification, rural CSPs can accelerate

the adoption of this mindset organizationwide. By prioritizing plant, people and processes, the CSP will see more value delivered to its communities and enjoy innovations that big carriers will wish they had the agility to adopt and deploy.

Jonathan Crawford is the manager of marketing and business development at Mapcom Systems. Contact him at jcrawford@mapcom.com.

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BY MARILYN A. BLAKE

Workplace Violence Prevention and Employer Responsibility



OSHA says that some 2 million workers are victims of some sort of workplace violence each year.

You see it more and more on TV—violence in the workplace. It can range from homicide to physical assaults, threats and verbal abuse. Workplace violence, which can include domestic violence incidents in the workplace, are an area that employers need to address in their training plans.

OSHA says that some 2 million workers are victims of some sort of workplace violence each year. Some of our telco employees fall into categories that might be at an increased risk. Jobs that handle money (yes, many telco customers bring cash into your offices to pay their bills) and outside technicians who often travel by themselves or during late nights for outages or into "bad" areas are certainly at an increased level for potential workplace violence attacks. OSHA specifically identifies utility employees (phone and cable installers) in its materials about workplace violence. Specifically, this means you need to train your employees to recognize signs and know what to do when they potentially are in these kinds of situations.

The "SHRM Workplace Violence Survey," published in 2012, found that over one-third (36%) of organizations reported incidents of workplace violence. Many employers have addressed the threat of workplace violence by installing security systems, developing zero-tolerance policies, training employees relative to awareness and recognition of employees at risk, intervening with employees who are at risk, and establishing employee assistance programs, among other responses and training plans.

Specifically, the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) defines workplace violence as any physical assault, threatening behavior or verbal abuse that occurs in the work setting. Acts such as psychological trauma due to threats, obscene phone calls, an intimidating presence and harassment of any kind are included.

NIOSH classifies perpetrators of workplace violence and domestic violence in the workplace into four types:

- 1. Criminal intent:** The perpetrator has no legitimate relationship to the business or its employees and is usually committing a crime in conjunction

with the violence. These crimes can include robbery, shoplifting, trespassing and terrorism. The vast majority of workplace homicides (85%) fall into this category.

2. Customer or client: The perpetrator has a legitimate relationship with the business and becomes violent while being served by the business. This category includes customers, clients, patients, students, inmates and any other group for which the business provides services. It is believed that a large portion of customer/client incidents occur in the health care industry in settings such as nursing homes or psychiatric facilities; the victims are often patient caregivers. Police officers, prison staff, flight attendants and teachers are other examples of workers who may be exposed to this kind of workplace violence, which accounts for approximately 3% of all workplace homicides.

3. Worker-on-worker: The perpetrator is an employee or past employee who attacks or threatens another employee(s) or past employee(s) in the workplace. Worker-on-worker fatalities account for approximately 7% of all workplace homicides.

4. Personal relationship: The perpetrator usually does not have a relationship with the business but has a

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personal relationship with the intended victim. This category includes victims of domestic violence assaulted or threatened while at work and accounts for about 5% of all workplace homicides.

Many stresses and conflicts at work could cause conditions that increase the likelihood of workplace violence, like layoffs, unachievable production requirements and rigid/authoritarian management styles. Add that to personal stress of finances, family disputes and sometimes psychological instability, and it's not a surprise that there are so many incidents of workplace violence.

Certainly, most employees with grievances don't become violent. However, violent incidents in the workplace ordinarily follow some sort of "trigger" that pushes an already vulnerable person to take drastic action. Be wary of employees who start to behave in the ways listed below:

1. They say they've been treated unfairly.
2. They say they're being forced to wait

for something (a promotion, raise, etc.).

3. They show signs of mental instability.
4. They begin to isolate themselves, are thought of as a loner.
5. They have recently been disciplined for something.

Some ideas of things employers can do to help protect their employees include:

- > Provide safety training so they know what conduct is not acceptable and what to do if they see violence. Many times your local police department will come in and provide this training.

- > Secure the workplace with extra lighting outside if it's dark when people arrive or depart from work, and have surveillance and security systems.

- > Minimize access by nonemployees by having ID badges or electronic keys, or have all guests sign in when they come and go.

- > Don't keep a lot of cash on hand in your offices where customers pay their bills. Stagger the times your office personnel take the money to the bank each day.

- > Tell your technicians if they don't feel safe that they do not have to enter a customer's house by themselves, and allow them to get reinforcements from the office.

Always contact the local police and get a report filed if you experience any violence at the workplace. Of course, get medical treatment provided, if necessary. Inform victims of their rights to prosecute the offenders, and make any changes to your training and/or physical plant that are necessary to help prevent violence from occurring in the future.

Employers must provide a safe and healthy workplace. Those that do not take reasonable steps to prevent or mitigate a recognized violent hazard can definitely be fined. Take advantage of resources to provide training for your employees in how to recognize and prevent workplace violence.

Marilyn A. Blake is chief operating officer at Telcom Insurance Group. Contact her at mab@telcominsgrp.com.

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RTIME '16 Preview



Rural Telecom Industry Meeting & Expo

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BY LIA MOORE

Warm Up in Orlando and Learn to Create Next-Gen Connections

RTIME '16 provides the strategies and information you need to create and advance your next-generation telecommunications network. You get a look into where gigabit Internet is going, why mobile apps are the new way to connect and how metered bandwidth can raise revenues. Plus, learn what's next in telecom policy and leadership techniques.



Gain Insights Into Profitable Creativity and Leadership

Start RTIME on a high note with jazz-guitarist-turned-CEO and author Josh Linkner. He is the keynote speaker for Monday's opening general session and shares ways to harness your team's creativity into productive and profitable outputs. Afterward, a panel moderated by NTCA Chief Executive Officer Shirley Bloomfield discusses the power of partnerships.

The second general session looks into 2016 on both the technology and policy fronts. Find out which technologies your consumers need, and hear NTCA staff speak on telecom policy.



Wednesday's closing general session brings leadership expert and former USS Benfold commander Michael Abrashoff to the stage. He delves into organizational transformation and his "leadership road map" principles. The closing panel examines anchor institutions and rural local exchange carrier collaborations.

During the general sessions, you'll also get updates on association happenings, policy information and Foundation for Rural Service (FRS) news.

Expand Your Knowledge

RTIME educational sessions focus on compelling topics that are relevant to your telco. Drill down into cloud revenue, everything video, cybersecurity and more. The telco

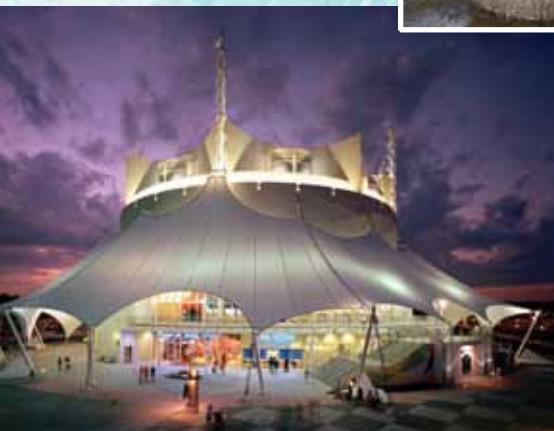
executive peer-to-peer roundtables are back for a third year. A variety of roundtables allow for all attendees to engage in interactive discussions with industry associates.



Discover New Products at EXPO '16

EXPO '16 at RTIME attracts over 100 exhibitors. These companies provide innovative products and services to help grow your telco. Telco executives can meet with representatives during lunch on Tuesday, and the hall is open to all on Monday evening and Tuesday afternoon. You can get a closer look at products in the Hot Technologies section or during exhibitor presentations.





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Be sure to take in as much sun and fun as possible while in Orlando. Conference attendees receive discounted **Walt Disney World®** park tickets. Seven exciting tours are offered, featuring the Kennedy Space Center, Lakeridge Winery, a dolphin and manatee encounter, and more. Join FRS for an evening with Mickey and Minnie Mouse or an afternoon of golf. Experience

the allure of *La Nouba™ by Cirque du Soleil* with the Telecommunications Education Committee Organization.



Visit www.ntca.org/rtime to register and for more information on speakers, sessions and meeting events.

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(as required by 39 U.S. Code 3685)

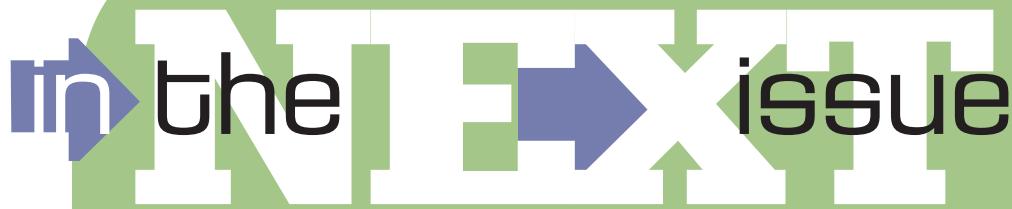
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	Average number of copies of each issue during preceding 12 months:	Actual number of copies of single issue published nearest to filing date:
Total number of copies	3,483	3,700
Paid and/or requested sales through dealers and carriers, street vendors and counter sales:	0	0
Paid and/or requested mail subscriptions:	2,888	2,873
Total paid and/or requested circulation:	2,888	2,873
Free distribution by mail:	0	0
Free distribution outside the mail:	231	150
Total free distribution:	231	150
Total distribution:	3,119	3,023
Copies not distributed for office use, leftovers, spoiled:	364	677
Copies not distributed for returns from news agents:	0	0
Total:	3,483	3,700
Percent paid and/or requested circulation:	93%	95%

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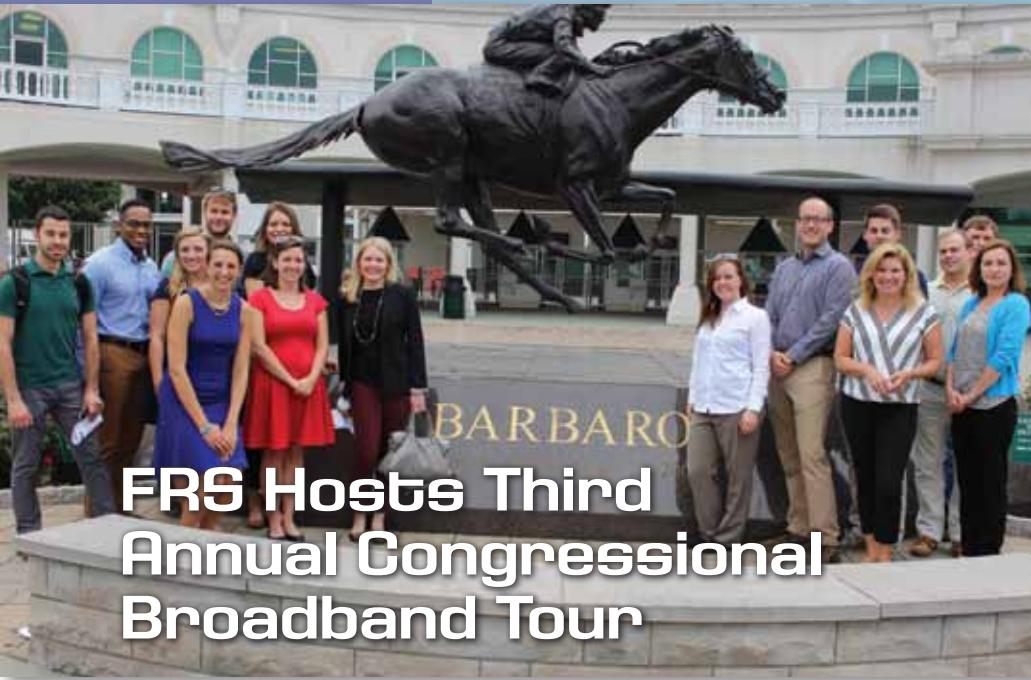
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NOVEMBER-DECEMBER 2015



FRS Hosts Third Annual Congressional Broadband Tour

By Tennille Shields, NTCA-The Rural Broadband Association Senior Content Specialist

This summer, a group of strangers met up at Reagan National Airport in Washington, D.C., to embark on a three-day tour of America's heartland. Their mission: To witness firsthand the geographic and financial challenges that NTCA-The Rural Broadband Association members in Kentucky and Tennessee experience on a daily basis to provide robust broadband services to remote rural areas.

Held August 17-20, the trip was designed to educate the congressional staffers on the key role that rural telcos play in their communities in the areas of economic development, education, health care and public safety.

Led by the Foundation for Rural Service (FRS) Executive Director Jessica Golden, the group included 12 staffers from both the U.S. Senate and the House of Representatives, representing Florida, Georgia, Indiana, Kentucky, Missouri, New Hampshire, North Carolina, North Dakota, Ohio, Texas, Utah and West Virginia.

Also joining the group was Jill Canfield, NTCA vice president of legal & industry and assistant general counsel, who offered critical educational insight on key policy issues, including Universal Service Fund reform, the E-Rate and Lifeline programs, retransmission consent, video issues and the call completion epidemic.

Tour participants visited with telco leaders from Mountain Rural Telephone Cooperative (West Liberty, Ky.), Peoples Rural Telephone Cooperative (PRTC; McKee, Ky.), Twin Lakes Telephone Cooperative Corp. (Gainesboro, Tenn.), DTC Communications (Alexandria, Tenn.), Ben Lomand Telephone Cooperative (McMinnville, Tenn.), North Central Telephone Cooperative (NCTC; Lafayette, Tenn.) and Tennessee Independent Telecommunication Group, LLC (Nashville, Tenn.).

Mountain Rural Telephone served as the first stop on the trip. The cooperative's service area was hard hit in 2012 by a tornado outbreak that caused exten- ➤ 44

Growing Young Entrepreneurs

By Kayla Nieskes, NTCA-The Rural Broadband Association

Big cities often attract young people due to the wide variety of opportunities available, so it follows that one surefire way to retain or bring those people back to rural communities is to create opportunities in their home environment.

To aid in the growth of rural communities and to encourage rural entrepreneurship, the Northeast Kansas Enterprise Facilitation (NEKEF) annually hosts the weeklong Northeast Entrepreneurship Academy in the summer for rising high-school sophomores. The program brings together high-school students with business leaders, economic specialists and successful entrepreneurs to explore how to launch their own business.

Students walk away ➤ 45



Congressional Broadband Tour

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sive damage. The group learned about the importance of emergency preparedness and received an overview of the telco's disaster recovery plan.

Day Two

The second full day of the trip included a stop at PRTC, where the group

toured the extremely mountainous area the telco serves.

Despite having no hospital, no railroad system and only one stoplight, McKee boasts a state-of-the-art fiber network.

The telco was designated as a Smart Rural Community (SRC) in 2014 in recognition of its broadband-enabled applications that are driving innovation in the community.

The group received hands-on instruction

on what fiber looks like, what it does, and, most important, how to splice it.

Keith Gabbard, chief executive officer (CEO) of PRTC, stated, "I'm passionate about making this area better for our young people who want to stay here," he said. "I think [the congressional staffers] were surprised to see that we are ahead of most of the country technologywise instead of behind it. ... The people here deserve the same service as those who live in urban areas."

From there, the group visited the Center for Rural Development, where they were joined by Nancy White, president and CEO of NCTC and board president of FRS, for discussions focused on rural economic development. Greg Hale, general

manager of Logan Telephone Cooperative (Auburn, Ky.), also discussed the importance of universal service and the role of rural Kentucky telcos.

The group then made its way to rural Tennessee to visit a Twin Lakes Telephone broadband deployment construction site. Congressional staffers also had the opportunity to meet with representatives from several NTCA telcos to hear more about the progress, opportunities and challenges of serving the state.

Next Stop

The next day the group spent the morning at NCTC, another SRC award winner. White led the group on a visit to Macon County General Hospital, a rural critical access hospital that uses telemedicine as part of its operations. A nurse explained to the group how advanced technology enables the hospital to communicate with doctors in urban areas and provide more specialized care.

In addition, the group toured NCTC's Data Center, where they also discussed data security and consumers' increased use of the Internet. White remarked that NCTC's customers' requirements for bandwidth have more than tripled in the past few years. Of that growth, she said, most of it can be attributed to Netflix.

The group wrapped up its congressional broadband tour in Nashville, Tenn. They visited iRis Networks, a wholesale carrier founded by 12 independent telcos that provides 100% fiber-optic broadband infrastructure to rural areas in Tennessee and parts of Alabama, Georgia and Kentucky.

"Rural Americans at their core are some of the most innovative people you will ever meet," said FRS's Golden. "The rural telcos that we visited on this trip told their stories beautifully to the visiting staffers," she continued. "They emphasized that rural communities are innovative and forward thinking—that these areas matter and their survival is key to our nation's success. I think that, at the end of the day, was the message we hoped staffers took home with them." ■



Photo: NCTC

Young Entrepreneurs

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with business plans for products and services they invent themselves.

NTCA-The Rural Broadband Association member Rainbow Communications (Everest, Kan.) has lent its support to the event for the past few years, including by having a representative on the board. "When Teresa McAnerney, the director of the NEKEF, first approached us with the idea in 2011, we wanted to help bring awareness to the program and to interact with the students as a telecommunications provider," said Jackie Peterson, Rainbow Communications marketing manager.

Using the company's local content channel, Rainbow NEK, Rainbow Communications Producer & Director Mike Twombly supervised the students as they wrote scripts so that the station could film 30- to 60-second commercials for their businesses, complete with voice-overs.

In addition to shooting their own commercials, participants also visited local business owners, worked on a business plan, had the opportunity to network with leaders, and researched financial resources that could be available.

Rural telecommunications companies can provide an important link between businesses and communities, and help to lessen the gap between small towns and the rest of the world. With more young people becoming aware of the opportunities that their communities provide, they may be motivated to stay.

Peterson agreed, stating, "Rural telcos can expound upon the message that with quality broadband service, our youth can live in their rural communities and yet run a global business." ☐



NTCA Members Host Elected Officials

Members of NTCA-The Rural Broadband Association took advantage of the August congressional recess to meet with their respective members of Congress back in their home districts.

Several rural telcos hosted elected officials at their company headquarters and engaged them on critical issues facing the industry and rural America, including the need for a standalone broadband support mechanism, the call completion epidemic and the importance of a rural spectrum bidding credit.

In addition, the congressional recess provided an opportunity for NTCA members to attend fundraising events and offer support through the association's political action committee, Telecommunications Education Committee Organization, to those elected officials who have championed rural America's cause. ☐

From left:

Beth Osler, director of customer /industry for UNTEL, Inc. (Unity, Maine), attends a fundraising event for Rep. Bruce L. Poliquin (R-Maine).

Richard L. McBurney, general manager/chief executive officer of Butler Bremer Communications (Plainfield, Iowa), gives a tour of the telco's headquarters to Rep. Rodney L. Blum (R-Iowa).

Premier Communications (Sioux Center, Iowa) hosts Lt. Gov. Kim Reynolds at its headquarters. While there, the group discussed the broadband bill, FirstNet and economic development opportunities in the region.

Doug Boone, chief executive officer of Premier Communications and NTCA vice president, attends a fundraising event in support of Sen. Chuck E. Grassley (R-Iowa).

ASSOCIATE
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National Information Solutions Cooperative



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 Solutions Providers" at www.ntca.org. To submit an associate member spotlight, email tshields@ntca.org.

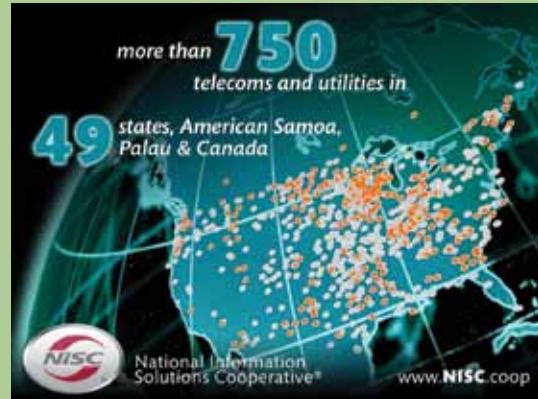
Submitted by Julie Yantzer,
Marketing Communications Consultant, National Information Solutions Cooperative

When was your company established? And how long has it been an NTCA associate member?

National Information Solutions Cooperative (NISC) was formed in July 2000 as a consolidation of the Central Area Data Processing Cooperative in Missouri and the North Central Data Cooperative in North Dakota. Both predecessor organizations were formed in the mid-1960s. For nearly 50 years, NISC has been serving telecommunications and utility cooperatives with technology solutions. NISC has been an associate member of NTCA since January 1971.

What are your core areas of business?

NISC is an information technology company that develops and supports software and hardware solutions for our Member-Owners, which are primarily telecommunications companies and utility cooperatives. NISC is an industry leader in providing advanced, integrated IT solutions for subscriber billing, accounting, engineering and operations, as well as many other leading-edge IT solutions. Our innovative solutions enable our Member-Owners to excel in customer service, maximize diversification opportunities and compete effectively in the changing telecommunications industry. Today, more than 5 million consumers in 49 states, American Samoa, Palau and Canada receive telecommunications or utility services from the more than 750 companies utilizing our advanced information technology systems.



How has your company adjusted to our evolving industry?

At NISC, we keep our fingers on the pulse of the ever-changing telecom landscape by working closely with our Member-Owners, as well as with associations such as NTCA. These close relationships ensure we are not only developing technologies that will support our Member-Owners today,

but also in the future.

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

As a cooperative, NISC is owned by the users of our systems, our Member-Owners, providing an unparalleled working relationship and inside understanding on industry operations, changes and requirements. Through collaborative activities such as the annual Member Information Conference, Joint Application Development Sessions and Regional Workshops, just to name a few, we value the voice of our Member-Owners and work closely with them to ensure our focus is where it needs to be. At NISC, we are not a vendor. We are an IT partner.

Complete this sentence: In five years, I see NISC ...

... continuing to grow. Not only will our staff, which is currently more than 1,000 strong, continue to grow, but also the long list of solutions and services we provide. From maps to apps and marketing to order management, NISC's solutions and services arsenal continues to grow—as well as our Membership—and the future holds great promise. ■

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