

The Magazine
of Rural Telco
Management

SPECIAL
TELECOM
BUSINESS
PULLOUT

Family-Friendly HR Policies

A Balancing Act



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the Return
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Service to All
in the
Tribal Lands



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Family-Friendly HR Policies: A Balancing Act

By Tennille Shields

Circumstances often require employees to take off significant amounts of time from work. They also may need help in filling the void between the depletion of their paid time off and the beginning of short-term disability. Learn how rural telcos have implemented family-friendly policies to alleviate some of the everyday challenges that present themselves in the workplace when life

takes unexpected turns.
COVER: SAM FERRO; PHOTOS: BIGSTOCK

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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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Maximizing the Return From Employee Training and Development

By Rachel Brown

American companies spent \$156.2 billion on employee training in 2011. That's \$1,182 per employee. Learn about the latest recommendations on what, and why, your telco should spend on different forms of training and development—everything from in-house and off-site courses to certifications and advanced college degrees.



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Brand Image and HR Policy

By Masha Zager

The way employees look, speak and act should always reflect the message the company tries to convey. How does your telco project a consistent, correct image to the public? To avoid confusion, human resources managers at rural phone companies work hard to get employees on board with new brand images. Find out what they require of employees both in, and outside of, the office.

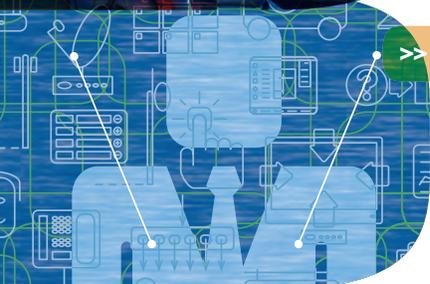


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Bringing Service to All in the Tribal Lands

By Anna Henry

Across most of the Indian country, national carriers that rely on return-on-investment analysis have been slow to provide service to tribal lands, spurring the creation of many tribal telcos. These companies focus on more than profitability. They provide greater access to telecommunications, create jobs, and promote economic and social development.



>

Special Telecom Business Pullout Section

Our 2013 supplement highlights products and services from 16 companies offering unified communications, 100G networks, broadband software, service tips, business intelligence, satellite, cybersecurity, consulting, backhaul, customer support, efficiency tools, video, distribution, ad insertion, content provision and sales—it's all here!

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In Gratitude

When I was a young girl, I spent a great deal of time reading about far-away places and great adventures that happened in wonderful and romantic locations all over the world, but none in my small, rural town. I never made a secret of the fact that when I was growing up in rural Pennsylvania, I could not wait to get the heck out of Dodge.

Reading opened up a world to me that I thought had to be so much better than where I was: a small town with one traffic light and too many nosy people. At the time, our town boasted a community center, a bowling alley, a bustling main street and even a department store. Does anyone remember G.C. Murphy? Compared with the decline my hometown is in now, it really was a thriving community when I was growing up.

Yet my heart and spirit were always restless and seeking out greater adventure. And reading those novels just flamed my desire to escape the humdrum of the small town for the noise, congestion and excitement of city life. As a teenager, I joked with my parents that the stork must have dropped me off at the wrong place because I was meant to be a city girl.

And a city girl is what I became as soon as I graduated college. During college, I spent a semester in Washington, D.C., studying politics at American University. I absolutely fell in love with city life. This was my calling. This was where I was meant to be. I loved public transportation. I loved all the people. I loved the hustle and bustle. I loved the constant rushing. It was pure adrenalin for me.

Following my graduation, I hurried back to D.C. to begin my adventurous, urban life. And I really do love everything about it. I still love the manic pace and excitement. The city gives me so many choices for food, clothes, books, art, education, music and socializing. It's been good to me.

Eight years ago, I came to work at NTCA—The Rural Broadband Association and fell in love again. How was I to know that it would bring me full circle back to a love I had lost as a teenage girl? I didn't know what to expect when I started my job here. I knew I'd be working in rural telecommunications, but I didn't know I would visit some of the most beautiful, untouched parts of our country. I didn't know that I would see amazing monuments and national parks. I didn't know that I would meet the most kind, giving, salt-of-the-earth people who care about their communities, are dedicated to their companies and committed to their industry.



When I started my job here, I thought I had so much to give to NTCA. Instead, you all have given so much to me. You have been generous with your time, kind with your discourse, thoughtful with your interactions. You have taught me to appreciate a slower pace of life, the lure of an afternoon at the lake sitting on the porch sipping sweet tea and the excitement of a rodeo. All these experiences helped me return to my rural roots.

The members I have met through NTCA have renewed my appreciation for all things rural. You have been so gracious to teach me about your communities, your challenges and opportunities. You have shared your enthusiasm by inviting me to visit your companies and hometowns, and by becoming more than just members to me. You have become cherished friends.

As I leave NTCA to accept a new job in a new association, I say farewell and hope that our paths will cross again in the future. NTCA remains a vibrant organization with a bright future through your involvement and participation. Thank you for all that you have given me, and know that while I am moving on, a little piece of each of you will stay with me. My heart will always beat rural.

Wendy Mann
Director, Communications
wmann@ntca.org

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That fire coming from our computers is Telcom hard at work designing products with this goal in mind. While some others may be using their computers for the same old same old, we're burning ours up designing and launching our new products and services and enhancing our existing ones.

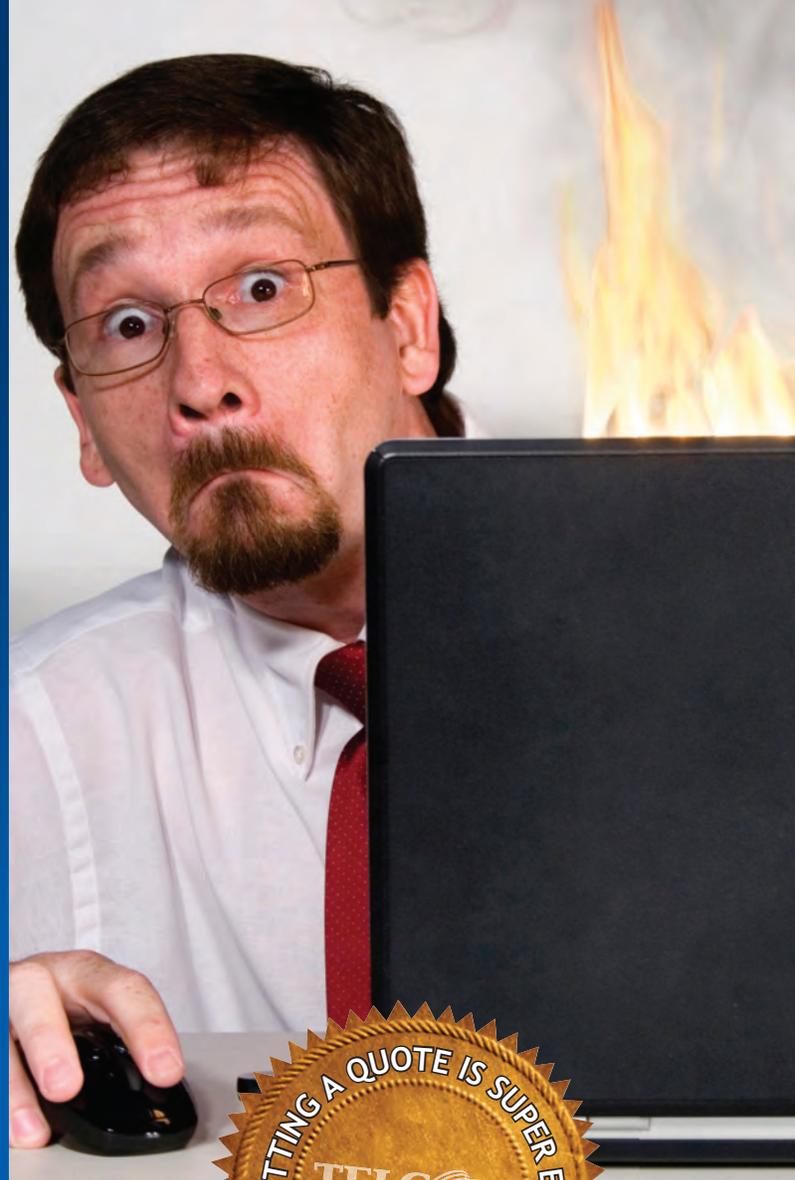
New Products and Services

- **Cell phone recycling program** that collects older unused models and pays or purchases them from the owner.
- **Independent Contractor Program** for the management of the risk of those businesses that you employ. We take on the role of manager of risk and compliance for you and also assist the contractor with insurance placement, if needed. When your Independent Contractors have proper insurance, your policy shouldn't have to respond to a claim. Thus, saving you premium on your insurance policy.
- **Personal Lines Insurance-** Through a partnership with MetLife, a respected and highly regarded national insurer, we now offer comprehensive personal line coverage protection to any NTCA member business. Getting quotes is as easy as calling 877-491-5089.

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BY SAGAN TROMBLEY



RETIREES FLOCK SOUTH

As the baby boom generation retires, many cities around the nation are attempting to boost their economies by attracting retirees to their city. The cities gaining the most retirees tend to have “big universities, which offer access to educational and other opportunities, good medical systems, a vibrant cultural life and access to beautiful places outdoors.”

Growing destinations for retirees:

- | | |
|--------------------|----------------------------|
| 1. Raleigh, N.C. | 6. Provo, Utah |
| 2. Austin, Texas | 7. Colorado Springs, Colo. |
| 3. Las Vegas, Nev. | 8. Houston, Texas |
| 4. Boise, Idaho | 9. Dallas, Texas |
| 5. Atlanta, Ga. | 10. Charlotte, N.C. |

►Source: thefiscaltimes.com

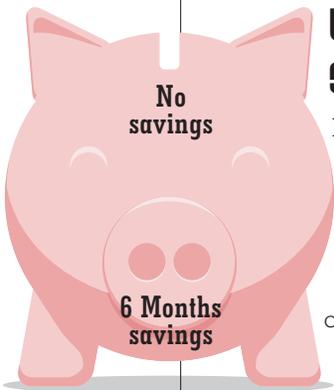
Where Has All the Savings Gone?

Do you have money to blow? According to one survey, most Americans do not.

Bankrate.com recently put out a report that indicates how financially set (or unset) Americans are. The findings indicated that “24% of Americans have enough savings to cover at least six month’s expenses, and only 50% have less than three months’

expenses saved up.” Twenty-seven percent of Americans reported having no emergency savings at all. Savings has not been a priority for Americans across all income levels due to stagnant wages and the rising cost of living, and these statistics have not changed in three years.

►Source: usatoday.com



Walking Your Way to Success

Imagine being able to answer phone calls, emails and voicemail, all while exercising at your desk.

Dr. James Levine, an obesity researcher at the Mayo Clinic, has created a makeshift desk that hovers over a treadmill, Levine can work at his computer and answer phone calls while walking at 1 mph. This speed allows him to burn an extra 100 calories per hour and up to 1,000 calories per 10-hour shift.

Levine developed the desk after a recent study revealed that “thin people are on their feet an average of 152 more minutes a day than couch potatoes.”

Office workers in Levin’s study indicated that this work system not only let them burn calories, but helped them be more alert and focused. And that means American workers may see smaller waistlines all around.

►Source: usatoday.com

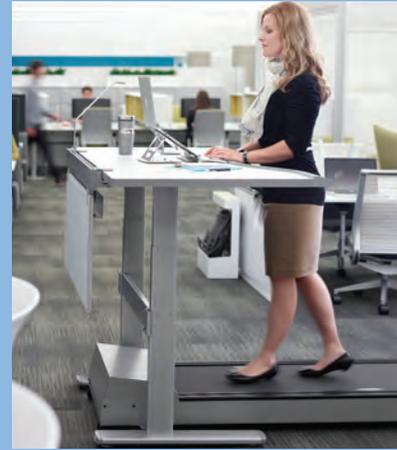
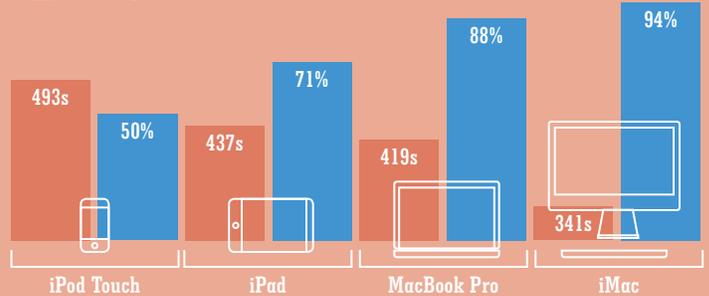


PHOTO COURTESY STEELCASE

Seconds waited before interrupting
Percentage that interrupted



What Your Media Device Says About You

A Harvard study indicates that assertiveness can be determined not only by people’s posture, but by the size of their media devices. The study tested 75 participants by giving them an iPod Touch, iPad, MacBook Pro or iMac, and then having them wait for five minutes to receive compensation for participating in the experiment. The researchers, unannounced to the participants, expanded the wait time to 10 minutes in the experiment to measure “how long it took for the participant to come find the researcher, if they did at all—a behavior classified as assertive.” The results were as pictured above.

►Source: nbcnews.com

Play With Your Pets While at Work

The Petcube puts a new spin on "pet friendly" workplaces.

Thanks to the new device, you can interact with your pets while you are away from home. The device, a Wi-Fi accessible webcam that you can control through a Web browser, allows you to play and talk with your furry friends from anywhere outside the home. The small camera and laser, deemed pet friendly by vets, should ship this fall.

►Source: nbcnews.com



PHOTOS COURTESY APPLE, PETCUBE

Technology Takeover: 'Tweet' Is Official

Tweet now means more than just a bird's call. The Oxford English Dictionary (OED) has announced that the act of tweeting, or posting to the social networking site Twitter, is now a recognized word of the English language. Listed as both a noun and a verb, the word breaks a long-term rule of the OED, which usually requires that a word must exist and be popular for 10 years to even be considered. Other tech-savvy words included in this year's OED: big data, crowdsourcing, mouseover, e-reader and re-direct.

►Source: allthingsd.com

noun

- 1 the chirp of a small or young bird:
the gentle tweet of a bird can be heard
- 2 a posting made on the social media website Twitter:
he started posting tweets via his mobile phone to let his pet was safe

verb

[no object]

- 1 make a chirping noise:
the birds were tweeting in the branches
- 2 make a posting on the social media website Twitter:
she talks about her own life, but she's just as likely to tweet about economics

Can't Fall Asleep? Turn Off the Tech

The next time you can't fall asleep; think about turning off your technology well before bedtime. A recent study by the Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute reveals that the hormone melatonin (which regulates our internal clock) is greatly affected by the exposure of light from computer tablets. Melatonin levels can drop 22% from just two hours of exposure; the lower your melatonin level, the harder it is to fall asleep. This artificial light keeps our brains from shutting down, and it may be affecting more than 90% of Americans who regularly use an electronic device before bed. Such suppression of melatonin could lead to obesity, diabetes and other types of disorders.

►Source: nytimes.com

Most & Least Engaged Employees

Ever wonder if people at work are actually engaged with the work they are doing? Gallup's "State of the American Workplace" report, released June 11, reported how employees in each state compared with one another based on their employee engagement index ("engaged," "not engaged" or "actively disengaged"). Responses were based on 12 workplace elements such as performance outcomes, customer service, retention and profit.

►Source: www.gallup.com

STATES WITH MOST AND LEAST ENGAGED EMPLOYEES

Jan-Dec 2012
Gallup Daily Tracking

State	% engaged
Most engaged	
Louisiana	37.0
Oklahoma	35.8
South Dakota	34.3
Georgia	34.0
Arkansas	33.9
South Carolina	33.6
Texas	33.4
Nevada	32.9
Wyoming	32.8
Alabama	32.8

Least engaged

Minnesota	25.7
Vermont	26.9
Delaware	27.4
New Hampshire	25.7
Illinois	27.7
Rhode Island	27.7
Washington	27.8
Utah	28.2
New Jersey	28.3

SOURCE: GALLUP

WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT THE MILLENNIAL GENERATION

The millennial generation spends an average of seven hours per day online. Seventy-one percent own a smartphone. A Financial Times and Telefonica Global Millennial Survey survey of 12,000 people age 18–30 in 27 countries and on every continent found that most millennials believe the economy in their region is not headed in the right direction. A gap in gender and geography is also affecting millennial views and decisions. Emerging millennial leaders are, by a two-to-one ratio, men over women.

►Source: linkedin.com



Growing and Adapting With Our Members in Mind

In today's fast-moving world of constantly evolving telecommunications options, it's easy to look at changes in consumer preferences as threats to your company's existence. But rather than perceiving those changes as threats, what if you looked at them as opportunities? All of a sudden, the future is not so bleak. In the long run, embracing these changes might be a better strategy than trying to put the genie back in the bottle, so to speak.

That's the theory behind some of the most significant and positive transformations NTCA has made in our more than 50-year history as we've grown and adapted along with you. In a previous column I told you about our decision to insert the words "rural broadband association" into the name of our new, unified organization to make sure there's no confusion about who we are and who we represent.

Even more cases of positive transformation can be found in the pasts of some of our most popular educational meetings. For example, about nine years ago, VoIP was really taking off, and in some cases, affecting telcos' revenues for traditional phone service. Rather than erecting barriers for entry into the VoIP market, NTCA started an event called VoIPossibilities. Later, that event was transformed into the popular IP Possibilities Conference, recognizing that VoIP is just one of the IP-enabled technologies our members are exploring.

This year we will celebrate another milestone in our educational offerings, which we continue to improve with the changing industry and regulatory challenges. Starting this fall, the TelcoTV conference is now TelcoVision, a name we believe more accurately reflects the abundance of innovative services small telcos are now offering, including IPTV. Instead of focusing mostly on video services as a revenue generator, this conference will give you insight on how to reap income from new technologies such as M2M, cloud-based networking and smart agriculture, just to name a few. With a continued focus on the latest hot new services and revenue opportunities, TelcoVision will set a course for success in all of your broadband strategies.

Another educational innovation that was launched with the future in mind is our online Live Learning Center, which is available on-demand 24/7 at www.ntca.org. This service is a real asset when traveling to a live



meeting just isn't possible. While it's still preferable to be there in person to receive the full benefit of our educational and networking opportunities, the Live Learning Center gives you a glimpse into the sessions offered during our largest meetings, including the Fall Conference and Rural Telecom Industry Meeting & EXPO, and provides the option to watch the entire program right from the comfort of your own office or share it with your team at a staff meeting or with your board members. It's all a part of our goal to deliver an educational program that meets you where you are—even if that happens to be hundreds of miles from the actual conference.

We're always looking for ways to improve our offerings, and not just in the education and training arenas. I'm proud of the ways we've adapted over time to better meet our members' changing needs. But we can always do more. As you look to the future, I urge you take advantage of the opportunities NTCA provides to grow and adapt to change in your own company. It's anyone's guess what may lie ahead, but if we treat potential threats as opportunities to advance our companies and our industry, we'll gain more than we can even imagine.

Shirley Bloomfield is chief executive officer of NTCA. She can be reached at sbloomfield@ntca.org.

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Your Dream Won't Be Perfect. Thank Goodness.

They always say that man is the deadliest prey. But I think they're wrong. I think the deadliest prey is "the perfect dream."

For one thing, it's incredibly seductive. Years ago, as I stared at my own blank piece of paper of a life, I got overwhelmed. I wanted to write down a perfectly crafted 10-year dream with hints of what I would also be doing in 50 years. I actually told my wife that. Upon turning 36, I told her, "I only have 10 years left of our oldest daughter living in our house until she goes away to college. I also only have 40 years left until I reach the average lifespan of the American male. I think I'm going to start a new dream called the 40/10 and come up with the perfect list of things I'll be doing for my dream for the next 40 years and the next 10 years."

She looked up from her book and said, "Oh? So you're just going to map out perfectly the next 40 years of your life? Oh good, I thought you were going to tell me something unreasonable."

For months, I tried. I spent hours and hours trying to come up with the perfect dream, and here's what I learned: It can't be done.

Why?

1. "Perfect" is a slippery word.

Your definition of "perfect" will change 1 million times. How do I know? Try to catch it. Tell yourself, "If I get a book published, that will be perfect." And then when that happens, try to wrap your hands tightly around the word "perfect" all you want. It will have moved on. Perfect will now be a book that sells 1,000 copies. Get there and perfect will shift again. And again, and again.

2. You're not God.

This might come as a bit of surprise to you, but you're not. Whether you're an atheist or a person of faith, that's one thing we can all agree on: You're not God. Neither am I.

Don't believe me? Try to run your dream with any degree of perfection and then watch how quickly you discover how many things you don't actually control—like the actions of every other person on the planet.

3. You're going to grow and change.

Thank goodness that 18-year-old me didn't come up with a perfect 40-year plan and then try to hold 36-year-old me to it. You wouldn't have believed what he thought was important back then. In fact, I don't really like what 26-year-old me thought either. I like 37-year-old me way better than 30-year-old me. I hope that every year I am blown away by the new ways I've matured and grown and changed. And I hope my dreams track right along with me.

When I bumped into those realities and realized I hadn't come up with the perfect dream, I was a little depressed about that. Whenever you don't know what your dream is, it seems like everyone around you has theirs perfectly figured out.

In fact, I don't want us to figure out what our dream is. I think that's too small, too restrictive and ultimately the wrong thing to do. We put too much pressure on ourselves by the way we frame the question, "What's my dream?" It gives you the belief that we're going to find one perfect thing that will sustain us emotionally and creatively until we're dead.

Nonsense. Life doesn't work that way. Not fun lives anyway.

A dream becomes a prison if you lock yourself into finding one perfect dream.

Instead, let's look for something that's a lot more fun and a lot more exciting to find.

Let's figure out an awesome life.

Not a single event. Not a moment. Not a perfect dream, but an awesome life. Something that lasts 50 or 60 or more years.

It's time to let go of "perfect." ■



Jon Acuff is a speaker and author. Learn more at www.jonacuff.com.



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Family-Friendly A BALAN

BY TENNILLE SHIELDS

An employee has cancer. Someone else is having major surgery and faces a long road to recovery. A colleague's child has a rare disease and is in and out of the hospital.

These types of extenuating circumstances often require the affected employees to take off significant amounts of time from work. In addition, they may need some help to fill the void between the depletion of their paid time off (PTO) and short-term disability kicking in—if that is even an option.

Rural telcos—large and small—are known for taking that extra step to accommodate their employees' needs. Some have implemented family-friendly policies to alleviate some of the everyday challenges that present themselves in the workplace when life takes unexpected turns.



Key HR Policies GIVING ACT

Have a Day, Gift a Day

What's a company to do when such circumstances arise? Park Region Telephone (Underwood, Minn.) put in place a policy in 2011 that allows employees to "gift" PTO to someone in need. According to Karen Thompson, human resource manager at Park Region Telephone, PTO donated is converted to a cash value based on the donor's pay rate and then converted back into hours based on the recipient's pay rate.

For example, she explained, if an employee earning \$20 per hour donated 10 hours (equal to \$200) to an employee earning \$15 per hour, it would convert to 13.3 hours of PTO received. No actual cash is paid; the hours simply are converted and PTO time taken and paid, she said.

The company requires those wishing to donate time to a colleague to maintain at least 40 hours of PTO after their donation. To date, the policy has been well received. "We have two employees with serious illnesses right now," Thompson said. "People have come up to me to say, 'If so and so needs time, I would like to donate some time—two days, four days, one week.' I made notes about who would like to donate, so when the need arises, I know who to go to." 





“We feel like we are being proactive in terms of taking care of employees in need. ... People here want to help each other. They care about each other.”

EILEEN HICKS, HUMAN RESOURCES MANAGER
LEACO RURAL TELEPHONE COOPERATIVE

“That’s the beauty of being a smaller company,” she continued. “You get to know each other and really bond with the people you work with.”

While well intentioned, these types of policies can be abused if not applied consistently and monitored properly. Eileen Hicks, human resources manager at Leaco Rural Telephone Cooperative (Hobbs, N.M.), shared that she witnessed people abuse their accrued time, then ask someone else to donate time to avoid having to take leave without pay. “It was awkward for everyone involved,” she said. “Your time is yours to use, but you shouldn’t make it someone else’s problem when you run out of time.”

The company revamped its leave program two years ago. An employee who wishes to request a leave donation is required to fill out a “request for leave” donation form and submit it to human resources. HR then disseminates the request anonymously to see if anyone at the company is interested in gifting PTO.

Leaco participates in short-term and long-term disability plans, so the leave donation plan is not intended to replace a disability plan, but instead, assist in filling in any gaps. “We feel like we are being proactive in terms of taking care of employees in need,” Hicks said. “People here want to help each other. They care about each other. If you struggle medically, chances are high that you will also struggle financially. This helps to alleviate some of the stress.

“Most people have accrued leave that may be paid when they leave the company,” she continued. “If employees are asking each other for time donations, it’s like asking for money out of their colleague’s pocket. There is a monetary value to it. Because of that, people feel obligated to make sure it is used judiciously.”

Phoebe McGavock, vice president at Star Telephone Membership Corp. (Clinton, N.C.), said Star Telephone’s leave time policy is very generous. Because of that, the company does not allow the gifting of PTO. If employees run out of time, they may request time off without pay.

However, given Star Telephone’s family-friendly atmosphere, McGavock said that everyone is willing to pitch in and provide financial assistance to those in need. “The amount of money employees will dig into their pockets and give to their colleagues is amazing,” she said.

Time for Family Affairs

Whether you are a mother/father, daughter/son, sister/brother or grandparent, you likely have received a phone

call alerting you that a loved one is in the hospital or that you need to take your child to a doctor’s appointment in the middle of the day. Coming in late or having to leave work early can be a disruption to the workplace, and nothing is worse than feeling like you have to choose between family and work obligations.

To alleviate some of those pressures, Hiawatha Communications Inc. (Munising, Mich.) implemented a new sick policy in 2013 that allows employees to take up to three days of regular sick time for a family member, defined as a parent, spouse, sibling, child, grandparent, grandchild or in-law.

“Employees can take advantage of this time for doctors’ appointments and family matters,” said Brandi Smith, assistant to the president at Hiawatha Communications Inc. “We are family oriented, and understand that we need to be flexible about these types of things. It boosts employee morale, and employees see it as a nice benefit and appreciate it.”

With Hiawatha being located in a rural town that is nearly an hour away from some of the larger medical facilities, Smith said employees appreciate this new extension of sick time to take family members to the doctor.

Taking things one step further, some companies have implemented policies that reflect their family and community-service focus. For example, Copper Valley Telephone Cooperative (CVTC; Valdez, Alaska) gives back to employees who use annual leave to volunteer for local nonprofit organizations.

Jody A. Morgan, Copper Valley executive administrative assistant, said an employee may fill out a request for leave to volunteer (i.e., coach Little League or volunteer at the native camp). For every hour of leave taken, CVTC will donate to that organization or another organization. “We have a \$2,500 annual budget for the program,” she said. “We limit it to 16 hours per year per employee, but then re-evaluate toward the end of the year.”

Kris Husby, office manager at Tri-County Communications Cooperative (Strum, Wis.), shared that the company’s EMTs and firefighters are allowed to carry their pagers on the job. “If they get called out for an accident or fire, we allow them to go and pay for their time,” she said. “They are providing an invaluable service, and it’s nice to know we have staff who can help out if the need arises.”

A Nod to Retirees

According to Gallup’s annual “Economy and Personal Finance Survey,” the average retirement age is 61, up four years since 1991. Talk to anyone in their late 50s/early 60s who is contemplating retirement, and they’re likely to cite finances and health benefits as their primary reasons for continuing to work longer. Recognizing this challenging dilemma that so many face, some rural telcos are extending family-friendly policies long after an employee retires.

In 2006, Tri-County Communications Cooperative re-evaluated its benefits program and extended its health-care coverage for retirees. Husby shared that the cooperative pays a portion of the premium for retirees until they reach the age of 65.

"NTCA has great insurance for those retiring under the rule of 85 [when your age plus years of participation add up to 85; if your company has adopted the rule of 85, you may be able to retire prior to age 65 without any reduction in benefits (if you meet the ROE requirement)], and this gives them an extended benefit," she said. "Most people are working longer and may not take advantage of this benefit for the long term, but when they do, they do."

"People still have health problems even after they retire, and they need coverage," she continued. "This provides them with a great transition into retirement and one less thing to worry about."

Quite similarly, Star Telephone Membership Corp. extends a full range of post-retirement benefits and concessions to retirees. "Star recognizes that employees are our greatest resource," said McGavock. "We provide financial assistance and the security of health benefits for those who have dedicated years of service to the co-op."

McGavock shared that the company has a program in

place for those who are 55 and older and have a minimum of 20 years of service. Star Telephone currently provides 100% of the medical premiums for its retirees, as well as their dependents.

In addition, the retiree receives a free landline (it must be listed in the telephone directory), Internet, TV and video services. McGavock shared that these concessions reinforce the retirees' connection to the company and keeps them up to date on the latest products and services the company has to offer. Plus, an informed retiree can offer the best form of word-of-mouth advertising, she said.

"Star Telephone is fortunate to have a board that has always been dedicated to our members and employees. They see the value of employees and retirees. We appreciate the loyalty our retirees have shown the company, and this is our way of showing our loyalty to them."

In this day of number crunching and always keeping an eye on the bottom line, some rural telcos are still finding ways to implement company policies that reflect the changing needs of current and former employees—inside and outside the workplace. ■

Tennille Shields is NTCA's senior writer/editor. She can be reached at tshields@ntca.org.

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MAXIMIZING THE RETURN From Employee Training and Development



BY RACHEL BROWN

"YOU ARE YOUR GREATEST ASSET. PUT YOUR TIME, EFFORT AND MONEY INTO TRAINING, GROOMING, AND EXPANDING YOUR GREATEST ASSET."

— Motivational Speaker Tom Hopkins

Swap out "you" with "your employees," and most business owners and managers would heartily agree with this quotation. But they'd also likely point out that "time, effort and money" are not limitless commodities in their operations—with small telephone companies and cooperatives being no exception.

Pricing It Out

Still, employee training and development is a multibillion-dollar business in the United States. According to the latest data from the American Society for Training & Development (ASTD), American companies spent \$156.2 billion on employee training in 2011, which, if divided evenly, translates into \$1,182 per employee.

Despite this seemingly hefty price tag, Kristen Fyfe, senior manager of communications for ASTD, noted that this figure is slightly lower than what was spent a few years ago. "But it's still a big jump from spending 10 years ago," she said. "The most successful companies recognize the value of employee training, and this is reflected in their market performance."

To figure out how much an individual company should be investing in employee training and development, ASTD said it recommends that a business spends 4% to 6% of its annual revenues on this expenditure, which encompasses everything from in-house and off-site courses to certifications and advanced college degrees.





Another benefit to employee training and development is lower turnover rates.

C. Michael Ferraro—president and chief executive officer of Training Solutions Inc.—did the math and explained, “So if a company has \$1 million in annual revenues, that means it should be spending \$40,000 to \$60,000 on training,” he said, adding that it’s not uncommon for companies to give more training to higher-level employees.

That is the case for Ironton Telephone Co. (Coplay, Pa.). Every year, installation technicians receive one week of training; customer service representatives get two weeks of training; repair desk personnel have two to four weeks;

and central office technicians receive four or more weeks. The cost of training for these different positions ranges from \$1,200 to \$2,600 per employee per week.

Ironton reaps the benefits of its investment in training, explained Gale Bennett, director of customer service and human resources for the telco. “Our goal is to have the best product at the best price with the best service. Therefore, we need skilled employees,” she said. “An educated employee makes fewer errors and increases quality.”

Bennett added that training employees is a win-win proposition. “We want the work experience to be mutually beneficial for the employee and employer,” she said. “And training the employee to do the job—and do it well—is important.”

Another benefit to employee training and development is lower turnover rates, Bennett said. “The lack of training, coaching and support are among the top reasons employees leave their workplace,” she said, pointing out that many of the company’s physical assets depreciate. “However, it is our goal to have the ‘human’ asset appreciate and become more valuable.”

Move from Pennsylvania to California and it’s a similar story and sentiment. At Sebastian Corp., a



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Before companies even line up training, they need to figure out what results they're hoping for and then the best way to get those results.

telecommunications provider headquartered in Foresthill, Calif., employees receive regular formal training, with some receiving more depending on their job function, explained Rhonda Armstrong, vice president of commercial operations. "Employees who work directly with our products and services that require certifications—installations, repairs, programming—need formal training," she said, adding that this is often provided by vendors. "Technicians, as well as support staff, who hold professional certifications require formal training to keep their certifications current."

Armstrong noted that areas of certification among her staff include accounting, human resources, information technology, construction (underground and electrical), commercial/residential services and data center. "We also encourage higher education and provide reimbursement for college degree programs," she said.

Employee training and development benefits both the company and the employees. That is especially true when employees are cross-trained to perform multiple jobs within the company. "Cross-trained construction technicians can continue working all year," she explained. "When construction slows in one area and picks up in another, we can shift employees based on the need of the company."

From the employees' perspective, cross-training provides job enrichment, Armstrong said. "They don't get bored with doing one job," she said. "Training provides opportunities for advancement and higher compensation."

Training also helps retain quality employees, Armstrong said. "Employees who want to learn more are more likely to stay because they see the benefits," she said.

Monitoring the Results

Training Solutions' Ferraro agreed that training and development—particularly people skills—increases employee retention and happiness. "Happiness may seem like an odd thing to measure, but you see it in terms of fewer sick days and less turnover," he said. "The number one reason people voluntarily leave their job is they think their manager is an idiot."

Other ways of monitoring the effectiveness of training include common-sense evaluations. "Safety training can be measured in terms of fewer accidents; sales training can be measured in increased sales," Ferraro said, adding that even sexual harassment training can be easily measured. "You can look at the before and after and say, 'Two years ago, we had two complaints about sexual harassment; since we've implemented the training, we've had none.'"

Many training programs have built-in assessments to measure knowledge or skill levels before training and to measure again after training to see what has been learned, explained Ferraro.

Michael Macnaughton—senior vice president of learning performance at Eagle's Flight, a provider of experiential learning programs—pointed out that monitoring training results is essential. "You can't manage what you don't measure," he said. "You should only invest in training that produces a result and one in which you can measure a return on investment."

Before companies even line up training, they need to figure out what results they're hoping for and then the best way to get those results, said Roberta Matuson, president of Matuson Consulting, a human resources firm. "Too many times, companies are looking to check off a box rather than really make a difference," she said.

Macnaughton agreed that companies often fall into the mindset of "training is good, we've done training, we've checked that box," he said. "Set your objective, and the objective should not be training in and of itself."

Companies also should be prepared to evaluate their employees, their tools and their processes, Macnaughton explained. "You need to look at the whole picture to find the root cause of an issue," he said. "Otherwise it's like fixing just one leg of the stool—it will still topple over."

Macnaughton recalled when Eagle's Flight was called in to help a bank that was experiencing customer service problems. "We quickly realized it was not a training issue with the staff," he said. "The bank machines were so bad that people were having trouble using them and would walk away in frustration. If you're not going to examine all three components, you're throwing your money out the window."

Saving Money

Sebastian's Armstrong pointed out that online training is less expensive than on-site classroom style training. "There are no travel costs, and there's less time away from the office," she said.

According to ASTD, 37.3% of all training in the United States is delivered online, including through personal computers, laptops and smartphones. "This represents a gradual increase," Fyfe explained. "Within the past four years, this percentage has been in the high 20s and low 30s."

Despite this trend toward online training, Armstrong said her company still finds it necessary to do formal face-to-face or on-the-job training. "This is often more beneficial," she said.

Training experts agreed that certain types of training are better suited to online or on-site training. "Online training is fine for compliance issues like safety protocols or learning about new products," Ferraro said. "If you're reviewing material about wearing safety gear or handling tools or about how to put together a widget, watching an online video for that is fine. But people skills training is better done in a classroom setting."

Matuson agreed that people skills training is better achieved through hands-on classroom settings. "If you're running a call center or taking a customer call, what are you going to learn from watching a video?" she asked. "Learning doesn't happen until you're on the phone with an irate customer, and a coach is listening in and able to give you pointers on what you did right or wrong. It comes down to practicing those skills."

If classroom training is necessary, it's less expensive to go to a community college versus a university, Ferraro said, pointing out that both are usually reliable sources for training.

Macnaughton pointed out that there are usually not economies of scale when it comes to the pricing for classroom-style training sessions. "There's the cost of the instructor per day and then the cost per participant, and that's the same price whether it's 20 people or 500 people," he said, noting that this means that small companies are not missing out on price breaks.

One mistake that's fairly common with small companies is thinking that it's not necessary to call in the experts, Macnaughton said. "They may think: 'We can do it ourselves,' but that's risky because they're less likely to have expertise in-house," he said.

But Ferraro argued that most small companies do have a lot of in-house expertise, and they should use that to their advantage when it comes to training. "If the managers and frontline supervisors are more coaches and mentors than they are bosses, this creates an attitude shift toward being more of a teacher and trainer versus a dictator," he said. "It's a matter of saying to employees: 'Here's what we're going to learn today; here's what we'll be learning over this year.'"

Ferraro said the biggest mistake compa-

Most small companies do have a lot of in-house expertise, and they should use that to their advantage when it comes to training.

nies make when it comes to employee training and development is that they don't do it at all. "Companies need to build training into the career path, and plan and review what has been learned in quarterly performance reviews," he said.

Matuson agreed that it's critical that companies invest in their employees and encourage their growth. "It will be even more critical as we pull out of the recession," she said. "Employee training sends a powerful message to the employees that they are valued." ■

Rachel Brown is a freelance writer. She can be reached at rachelsb@aol.com.

The advertisement features the CDG logo (three interlocking circles) and the text "cdg Smart Data Solutions". The website "www.cdg.ws" and phone number "1-888-234-4443" are in the top right. The main heading is "Mediation" in large blue font, followed by the subtitle "The art of collecting, aggregating and preparing data for accounting, auditing, archiving or invoicing functions." in smaller blue font. Below this is a paragraph: "Missing or defective data can greatly impact your optimization of raw data to billable revenue. CDG's enhanced, stand-alone Mediation system can help you filter, prepare and track every record from data feed to billable record with confidence. Visit our website to learn more." A speech bubble contains a testimonial: "CDG's Mediation software out produced our in-house programs, in accuracy and error checking." Below the testimonial is the name "SRT Communications". The bottom of the ad features a row of colorful trees and two stylized buildings.

BRAND — AND HR POLICY — IMAGE

BY MASHA ZAGER



O

ne of the most important tasks a telco entrusts to its employees—along with keeping services running and customers satisfied—is projecting a consistent, correct image to the public. Customers shouldn't have to guess what a company stands for or what role it plays in the community. The way employees look, speak and act should always reflect the message the company is trying to convey.

TELCO-BRANDED CLOTHING SENDS A MESSAGE TO CUSTOMERS, but that message depends on the condition of the clothes and the professionalism of the employees wearing the clothing.



Visual identity is an increasingly important carrier of the brand message. Telcos, like other companies, periodically refresh or change their brands to bring their visual imagery up to date or align it with business changes. These rebrandings may involve changes to retail spaces, websites, marketing collateral, vehicles and, not least, employee attire.

To avoid brand confusion, human resources managers at rural phone companies work hard to get employees on board with new brand images—sometimes to the extent of compromising on proposed changes to make them more palatable to employees. However, there is less agreement about whether an off-the-job employee has the same responsibility to represent the company's current brand image. ▶



Presenting a Professional Appearance

Dickey Rural Telephone Cooperative (DRN; Ellendale; N.D.) is undergoing a long-term transformation from a telephone provider to a technology solutions provider. The company offers a wide range of services, including telephone, Internet, TV, online backup, managed IT service, security and surveillance.

DRN expects its employees to be knowledgeable on all the services they offer, and the company's cultural transformation requires its employees to "not only have the skill sets to be the technology solutions provider, but to also look and dress the part," said Marketing Manager Janell Hauck.

DRN has had a presentation policy for several years. The outside-plant employees have worn DRN logoed shirts, but the inside employees were allowed to dress in business casual attire. As of July 2013, all employees had to adhere to a new dress code, whether or not they interact with the public.

Employees were given allowances to purchase DRN logoed shirts, pants and jackets from an approved supplier. "Business casual" is no longer acceptable. DRN inside employees may wear business suits as they see fit. Sonja Bommersbach, human resources manager, said, "As

with any change, it may take some time for employees to acclimate to the new look."

Hauck said the company has no problems with employees wearing their DRN-branded shirts out of the office. "For example," she said, "I may go straight from work to a school activity." However, because employees who do this are "representing DRN in some fashion," they should wear branded clothing only if it is up to date and in good condition.

After researching its options, DRN decided to donate its old branded clothing to a nonprofit charity, God's Child Project. Employees can voluntarily return their branded clothing to be donated to God's Child Project. Based in Mandan, N.D., the charity ships clothing to developing nations. DRN's donated clothing will be distributed in Guatemala and El Salvador.

The Advantages of Leasing

West Carolina Rural Telephone Cooperative (Abbeville, S.C.) is also considering requiring inside employees to wear company-branded clothing for the first time. (Outside workers already have company shirts, pants, jackets and hats.) Executive Administrative Assistant Marie Titus said that though "everyone is on board with having a professional look," some employees, especially those who do not have contact with customers, object to having to wear company-branded clothing.

Titus said, "We're exploring making the uniform nonmandatory by offering a couple of different styles and also allowing the option of a company name tag with the logo on it if they wear their own shirt." The advantage of having employees who are not customer-facing wear company-branded clothing, Titus explained, would be that when they go out to lunch or to shop, the brand is reinforced and people are reminded that West Carolina Rural Telephone is involved in the community.

Titus noted that changing uniforms for outside employees is easy because the uniforms are leased and are exchanged every week for laundering. Shirts with an old brand are simply turned in on Friday, and ones with the new brand are dispensed on Monday. However, if the company decides to require company-branded clothing for inside employees and gives them clothing allowances (an option that is less expensive than leasing), handling logo changes could become more complicated. Still, Titus said, "As a small company, I think we could control it anyway."

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C O N S U L T I N G



Panhandle Telephone Cooperative consolidated under the PTCI brand.



Phasing Out an Old Brand

Mitzi Dain, director of human resources at Panhandle Telephone Cooperative (PTCI; Guymon, Okla.), said her company purchased shirts twice a year for its outside-plant employees and let them keep the old shirts to wear at home. "When they're working, we want to make sure they're clean and not in torn attire, but we have no problems with them looking

bad in the old ones," she said. However, replacing the shirts on a regular basis helps ensure that employees are always wearing current brands.

Panhandle also tried to enforce branded wear for its indoor customer service employees but found that the policy resulted in a "huge mess." The telco eventually settled for having the employees wear badges instead. Dain said, "The problem was the time involved in getting everyone fitted. They wanted options in terms of color, they got really tired of wearing the same thing all the time and the cost was pretty steep."

When the company terminated one of its brands and consolidated under the PTCI brand, it requested employees retire all clothing with the obsolete brand (in addition to uniforms, employees also have company-branded clothing given to them for annual meetings or just for casual wear). Dain said employees complied with that request voluntarily. Occasionally, she sees members of the public using items with the old brand—umbrellas or tee-shirts that the company may have given out at meetings—"but I just let it be," she said.

Getting Employees on Board

Bluegrass Cellular (Elizabethtown, Ky.) recently underwent a full-scale refresh of its branding, launching its new look at the beginning of June. Barry Nothstine, the company's vice president of sales and marketing, explained that the new logo and tagline ("Your community, expanded") emphasize both the local nature of Bluegrass Cellular's operation and its role in connecting the community to the outside world.

Sherry Whitman-Powers, the company's executive director of HR and support services, pointed out that because a brand "creates an inspiration that spurs an employee's

Focus

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Bluegrass Cellular's brand change involved not only a new color and logo but more professional looking dress shirts.

loyalty and pride in the company," changing the brand can be emotionally difficult for employees—which is why the human resources department worked to get workers to embrace the new brand.

Bluegrass provided two new shirts to each employee at the time of the brand transition. The brand change involved not only a new color and logo but a new style—the old polo shirt was replaced by a more professional-looking dress shirt. Whitman-Powers said the company had no policies regarding use of the outdated brand and so far has not requested that employees turn in their old uniforms, though she is considering how to encourage them to do so. However, because the company refreshed its stores and prepared its employees thoroughly for the transition—and because the new shirts are so much nicer looking and were presented freshly pressed—she “didn’t anticipate anyone wearing the old brand” on the job.

What they wear off the job is another story, however. Nothstine said, “In the stores, we ask that employees only wear the current brand. ... But once we give something out, I don’t want to say they can’t wear it anymore.” In his view, old logos and taglines are a valuable part of the company’s legacy, and any brand confusion caused by an obsolete logo seen in the shopping mall is more than offset by the advantage of keeping the company’s name in the public eye.

In fact, Nothstine, who has been at the company for many years, said he still owned—or had given away—many pieces of clothing with legacy brands. “I’m one of the worst ‘brand violators,’” he confessed, laughing.

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BY ANNA HENRY

BRINGING Service to All IN THE Tribal Lands

Tribal lands in the United States are among the most challenging communities with respect to telecommunications. Across most of the Indian country, national carriers that rely on return-on-investment analysis have been slow to provide service to tribal lands, and that has been the impetus behind the creation of many tribal telcos. The goals of these companies focus on more than profitability. They strive to strengthen their communities by providing greater access to telecommunications services, creating sustainable businesses that provide jobs, and developing telecommunications infrastructure that promotes economic and social development.





Basic Business

For numerous tribal telcos, there are still growth opportunities in providing basic phone service. Close to one in five native people still don't have basic phone service, making telephone subscribership levels on tribal lands the lowest in the country. Outside of Indian lands, the national service rate approaches 98%.

One company on a staggering growth curve, and providing top technology to the well-covered Fort Berthold Reservation, is Reservation Telephone Cooperative (RTC; Parshall, N.D.). When rock fracturing technology started being used in the 200,000 square mile Bakken oil formation, its small town became a boomtown reminiscent of the gold rush era. That's put unique pressure on RTC. As of May 1, RTC had 1,170 pending service orders, including 661 for connecting new service.

Royce Aslakson, RTC chief executive officer (CEO)/general manager, explained that as a result of bringing fiber to the oil rigs and well site facilities, farms and ranches passed en route now have fiber they were unlikely to get otherwise. That has allowed some to gain access to fiber services for the first time. The boom has also created well-paying jobs. In 2007, RTC ▶



PHOTOS COURTESY: HOPI TELECOMMUNICATIONS INC., SACRED WIND COMMUNICATIONS, RESERVATION TELEPHONE COOPERATIVE



had 58 employees. Since the Bakken discovery, RTC has grown to 108 employees: 94 full-time and 14 part-time.

But growth has drawbacks, too. Aslakson said those include the loss of personal relationships with customers, difficulties finding qualified employees who can hit the ground running and increased wait time for service orders to be completed.

Sacred Wind Communications (Albuquerque, N.M.) is another company to successfully tap into growth potential. Though it is not tribally owned, it's wholly dedicated to serving the tribal community. It was formed in 2006 through the purchase of last mile infrastructure from Qwest Corp. At that time, 76% of homes on Navajo land had no access to basic phone or broadband due to lack of infrastructure. CEO John Badal suspected access was limited because the financial incentive was low and the time-consuming and arduous process of getting rights-of-way is an added deterrent.

With an exclusive focus on tribal needs and the use of Rural Utilities Service (RUS) loans and the Universal Service Fund (USF), Sacred Wind invested \$50 million to create a total network. That included improving on copper wire, creating two central offices, adding fiber optics for new capacity and creating a network of communications towers that serve a direct distribution point. In a service territory roughly the size of Delaware, 80% of the homes now have coverage. That is expected to expand to 90% by year-end, with 100% of those homes having access to broadband. That effort has created quality jobs for tribal members, brought in investments from outside of the state and added about \$50 million to the taxpayer base in the state of New Mexico.

Broadening Broadband

In response to feedback on the impediments to broadband adoption, late in 2012 the FCC created the Lifeline Broadband Adoption Pilot Program. Gila River Telecommunications Inc. (GRTI; Chandler, Ariz.) and Hopi Telecommunications Inc. (HTI; Flagstaff, Ariz.) are among the 14 eligible telecommunications carriers (ETCs) selected to participate. The pilot is intended to expand broadband use and provide high-quality data to the commission on how the Lifeline program

The (Lifeline Broadband Adoption Pilot Program) is intended to expand broadband use and provide high-quality data to the commission on how the Lifeline program could be structured to promote the adoption and retention of broadband services by low-income households.

could be structured to promote the adoption and retention of broadband services by low-income households. The specific pilot offering varies by ETC.

At HTI, ETC status has already helped fund DSL expansions and service upgrades, but the company reached a plateau around 500 subscribers. General Manager Carroll Onsaie reports that service costs and computer affordability were key roadblocks. HTI's pilot has been tailored to address these commonly cited reasons. Kicked off in August 2012, the HTI pilot is tracking participation of four groups. One group was offered low-cost computers; the second and third

groups each received a reduced rate, but a different speed of DSL, along with low-cost computers; and the fourth was offered a choice of low-cost computers or discounted DSL service. All participants received computer training.

GRTI has just over 1,000 DSL lines for a service area with 12,000 residents. For its pilot program, rolled out in May, a limited group of qualified participants were offered the choice of various discounted broadband price points at different speeds. Participants also could elect to get a low-cost computer. Consumer choices are expected to reflect price point preferences and whether the offering of a low-cost computer entices the use of broadband.

Companies like Tohono O'odham Utility Authority (Sells, Ariz.) view broadband as a key component of its product offerings. Rather than seeing growth in basic service, Tohono is losing about 5% of its 3,800 landline subscribers a year due to people switching to cellphones. Its focus is now on offering a higher capacity fiber to the home to provide access to things like distance learning, medical resources, streaming video applications and new business opportunities.

Funding Futures

Tohono General Manager Mike Bethurem believes the biggest challenges the company faces are continually finding the funds to continue to expand service to unserved areas, and trying to keep operating costs at a level that can be covered by a bill people can afford.

To realize its goal of providing a higher capacity pipe, Tohono has two major ongoing projects. One is rolling out

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TABLE 1

Lifeline and Link-Up Subscribers and Beneficiaries

	2011	2012
LIFELINE		
Nontribal subscribers	13,286,032	15,316,902
Tribal subscribers	463,099	809,858
LINK UP		
Nontribal beneficiaries	4,011,533	—
Tribal beneficiaries	285,964	—

SOURCE: DATA PROVIDED BY THE FCC.
2012 FIGURES FOR LINK-UP BENEFICIARIES UNAVAILABLE.

fiber to the home. The \$10 million project will provide broadband in heavier-populated areas of the reservation. A Broadband Initiative Program (BIP) award is financing 75% of the project, and a low-interest RUS loan is covering the remaining 25%. A \$7 million middle mile project is running fiber to villages and is funded with a 50/50 split in financing between a BIP grant and another RUS loan.

Future financing is the major concern. Tohono, like other rural telcos, is trying to figure out how to make up lost revenue due to USF reform. With the reduction in high-cost loop support and talk of reducing the regulated rate of return, Bethurem foresees the possibility of losing 15% of the telco’s current revenue stream.

Consumer Capacity

Federal aid also plays a significant role for tribal telco consumers. The national average poverty rate for American Indians averages 27%, though for some tribes that number is almost two and a half times higher. Without programs like Lifeline and Link-Up that have special provisions for those on Tribal Lands, phones would be unaffordable.

For example, GRTI has 100% network availability to its reservation and a poverty rate around 49%. While 84% of the population has phone service, 80% of access lines are paid for through Lifeline assistance.

Nationwide in 2012, Tribal Land Lifeline subscribers increased close to 75% from the year prior. For that same period, the nation’s nontribal Lifeline subscribers increased close to 15%. (Refer to Table 1.)

Today there are 10 tribal telcos that have the federal ETC certificate necessary to offer these, and other, forms of customer assistance. As part of recent USF reform this year, these ETCs are required to serve as liaisons between tribal governments and the FCC Office of Native Affairs and Policy to gather information that will help ensure tribal voices are taken into account in FCC proceedings.

Service Addresses

For other potential customers, lack of finances and help from ETCs isn’t the issue. It’s the time and resources it takes to track down information like a legal service address. Like other service providers, Sacred Wind needs customers to provide several pieces of documentation establishing legitimate residency and to provide a rural address for 911, which often doesn’t exist. The telco addresses these obstacles by obtaining customer approvals and making 100-mile trips to the county to file for addresses on their behalf. Long-standing homes may no longer have a copy of the home site lease. Those cases require a visit to the Navajo Nation capital to get a copy of the lease.

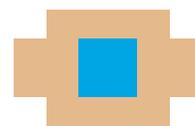
Service Enticements

Telcos have looked to offer other conveniences, such as potentially life-saving services. For its aging demographic, GRTI implemented an Alert 1 program that is similar to the call-for-help Lifeline pendant, and it has supplied enhanced 911 service. E-911 calls are forwarded to the company’s own public safety answering point (PSAP), which routes emergency services to the appropriate location using vertical and horizontal coordinates rather than street addresses. This system also interfaces with traditional outside PSAP systems. Sacred Wind introduced a 211 call service to link customers to United Way, which provides them access to things like resources for elderly care and supplemental food services.

Conclusion

Like other demographic groups, socioeconomics vary from tribe to tribe, as do their challenges and successes. That makes the service offerings and marketing efforts somewhat unique for each tribal community. However, like their nontribal counterparts, access to financing for network improvements, the restructuring of USF, users unfamiliar with computer technology and widely dispersed homes separated by often installation-challenging topographies are commonly cited challenges. Government will continue to play a key role in making it possible to provide phone and broadband service to all.

Anna Henry is a freelance writer. She can be reached at headlineink@comcast.net.



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Showrooming: How to Turn Enemies Into Advocates



What would you do in this situation? A young man—let’s call him Andy—walks into your store and starts looking at your merchandise. Suddenly he pulls out a smartphone and snaps a picture. Then he starts tapping away at the keys on his device.

What’s going on? It seems Andy is looking up your merchandise on the Internet, seeking a better price. When he finds one, he’ll order the item online. With that done, he’ll walk out of your store. Revenues to you: Zero.

Andy is a “showroomer”—a shopper who examines merchandise in a brick and mortar store, then uses a smartphone to find a better deal at a rival’s website.

Understanding Andy

Andy is part of a growing group of shoppers who are making life difficult for retailers.

Research shows that many active showroomers are similar to Andy: males between the ages of 18 and 34. Of people in this demographic who own smartphones and who have recently shopped for products in brick and mortar stores, 64% say they have done some showrooming. That figure compares with 52% for the general public with the same characteristics. The data come from a survey by Forrester Research and marketing firm Aprimo.

Look for more Andys in your store: In the same Forrester-Aprimo survey of young men owning smartphones, 47% of respondents said they planned to increase the usage of their devices for researching prices. “This is alarming in an environment where there is price competitiveness,” said Sucharita Mulpuru, principal analyst at Forrester.

Price Transparency

What’s driving the growth of showrooming? It’s no secret: Personal technology is getting more powerful every year, breaking down the concrete walls that have long blocked public access to pricing information around the country and the world.

And price—not the availability of a related style unavailable in a store—does seem to be the determining factor in a showroomer’s purchase decision. Some 75% of purchases that start in the store and end up online are due to price, according to a survey from e-commerce company fluidretail.com. This price sensitivity seems to be characteristic of the population in general. A good 70% of shoppers have become more sensitive to price in the past year, according to a survey from Parago.

Dealing With Showrooming

The above numbers suggest that showrooming is growing. Every retailer needs to deal with the phenomenon in a constructive way.

But how? You might be tempted to ban the practice. Some retailers have done just that: They ask showroomers to leave the store, or install technology that blocks Wi-Fi signals. One retailer even posted a sign announcing a \$5 “just looking” fee, refundable at purchase.

Such steps, though, can create bad feelings among your regular customers. Some of them, after all, would like to do a little showrooming of their own—not to cheat you out of a sale but to make sure your prices are reasonable. They also might want to access online details about—and reviews of—items they are considering buying.

Personal technology is getting more powerful every year, breaking down the concrete walls that have long blocked public access to pricing information.

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“Don’t make the assumption that someone with a smartphone is just looking for a lower price,” said James E. Dion, president of Dionco Inc., a Chicago-based retail consulting firm. “Some are finding out what other people are saying about merchandise.”

TIP #1: Fine-Tune Your Price Reputation

A better solution to the showrooming puzzle starts with the knowledge that pricing, as noted above, is the number one driver for showroomers. Cultivate a reputation for reasonable prices and showroomers will be less aggressive.

“People often showroom because a retailer has done a bad job establishing pricing credibility,” said Joshua Pollack, executive consultant at the Parker Avery Group. “The consumer is not necessarily looking for the lowest price—just a reasonable one.” He suggests getting ahead of the issue by maintaining a firm grip on your own knowledge of prices. What is Amazon.com asking? The other brick and mortar stores down the street? Stores in nearby cities?

“Retailers are notoriously bad for not knowing what the competitors’ prices are,” Pollack said. That leads to wide pricing disparities that only fuel the showrooming fire.

Fair pricing, though, is not the final word in battling the showroamer. Indeed, you can go too far in the attempt to go head-to-head with the marketplace. Some retailers, for example, have experimented with promises to match any competitor’s price. That can be too costly. “Price matching is a recipe for disaster,” Dion said. “You have to be competitive, but you cannot beat an online retailer that has no brick and mortar store and no associates to pay.”

TIP #2: Engage With Showroomers

Now let’s answer the question that opened this article: What do you do when you see Andy pull out a smartphone and start tapping keys?

Proceed with caution: Andy might not even be a showroamer. “You don’t know whether a person with a smartphone is searching a competitor’s website or



**TACTICS
IN THE SHOWROOMING WAR**

Retailers can deal effectively with showroomers by promoting a fair price image and engaging productively with smartphone users. Here are some additional tactics retailers are using to blunt the showrooming impact:

- > **Offer services** unavailable online.
- > **Bundle items** into “complete solution” packages that cannot be easily priced online.
- > **Curate your assortments.** Include unique items that cannot be found easily online.
- > **Offer branded merchandise** that cannot be price matched.
- > **Choose suppliers carefully.** Carry merchandise from those that do not also supply online vendors.
- > **Use mobile transaction devices.** Replace cash registers with tablets that allow the staff to interact with customers and provide immediate merchandise information.
- > **Create your own mobile app** that assists customers and controls the online experience.
- > **Keep asking: What do shoppers want that they cannot get online?**

searching your own, which happens quite a bit,” Pollack said.

The best response to Andy is to initiate a productive engagement, exhibiting the same positive mental attitude and skilled salesmanship you employ with your best customers. Here are three possibilities:

> A general approach that opens a conversation: “Good afternoon. Is there information I can provide you? Let me tell you what we carry and why we carry it.”

> An approach that emphasizes some service that the customer cannot get from a Web merchant: “I noticed that you are looking on the Web for information. That’s cool. I do that myself. You may find that [the item] appears to be a couple bucks cheaper elsewhere. It really isn’t because [explain what you offer that the Web offer does not].”

> An approach that tells showroomers what they are doing is smart and that you are on their side: “Hey, I see you

have a smartphone. I use one too. If you want to do a price match, let me know. I am right here.”

Such responses can communicate your commitment to price parity. Your endorsement of showrooming testifies to your belief in your store as the best place to shop.

“It’s smart to promote that you welcome showrooming,” said Patrick Fitzpatrick, president of Atlanta Retail Consulting. “Don’t try to hide the practice. Put it out on the table. Let people know how much you want their business.”

Providing your associates with training in this area may be the best thing you can do. “Invest in your people,” said Lisle Davies, partner at the Grayson Co., a New York City-based consulting firm. “If there is a 5% to 10% difference in price between a store and online item, your people can still make the consumer feel there is value in a store transaction.”

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17	Mammoth Networks	307-685-5536	www.mammothnetworks.com
43	Mid America Computer Corp.	402-426-6222	www.maccnet.com
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11	National Rural Telecommunications Cooperative	703-787-0874	www.nrtc.coop
20	Power & Telephone Supply Co.	901-324-6500	www.ptsupply.com
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WINNERS Circle

BY JONAH ARELLANO



2013 NTCA TeleChoice Award Winners



NTCA—The Rural Broadband Association honors excellence in member company public relations and marketing through its annual TeleChoice Awards. This year, nearly 100 entries were displayed and 26 winners were announced during the association’s PR & Marketing Conference in Lake Buena Vista, Fla.

Entries in five main categories—annual reports, complete marketing campaign, customer newsletters, single-target print publications and websites—were judged in three divisions based on the number of access lines served by the entrant. Awards also were judged by two production types: “in-house” and “outsourced” production. “In-house” refers to entries for which the creative aspect originated within the member companies, while “outsourced” refers to those entries for which the creative aspect was implemented with assistance from a consultant or outside firm.

Entries were judged on design, writing, creativity and other elements specific to each category.

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- 5,001–10,000 Access Lines
- 10,001+ Access Lines

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Gardonville
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Telephone
Association
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Cooperative
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Nemont Telephone Cooperative
(Scobey, Mont.)



Outsourced
Pulaski-White Rural
Telephone Cooperative
(Buffalo, Ind.)



In-house
Twin Valley
Telephone, Inc.
(Miltonvale, Kan.)



Outsourced
Pioneer Telephone
Cooperative
(Kingfisher, Okla.)

CUSTOMER NEWSLETTERS

Outsourced
Rural Telephone Co.
(Glenns Ferry, Idaho)



In-house
NineStar Connect
(Greenfield, Ind.)



Outsourced
Reservation Telephone
Cooperative
(Parshall, N.D.)

In-house
Panhandle Telephone
Cooperative, Inc.
(Guymon, Okla.)



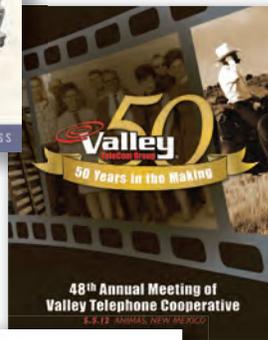
Outsourced
Alliance Communications
Cooperative
(Garretson, S.D.)

ANNUAL REPORTS

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Pulaski-White
Rural Telephone
Cooperative
(Buffalo, Ind.)



In-house
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(Brainerd, Minn.)



Outsourced
Valley TeleCom Group
(Willcox, Ariz.)

In-house
Golden West
Telecommunications
Cooperative
(Wall, S.D.)



Outsourced
SkyLine Membership Corp.
(West Jefferson, N.C.)



WEBSITES

Outsourced
 D & P Communications
 (Petersburg, Mich.)



In-house
 Peoples Rural Telephone Cooperative
 (McKee, Ky.)

In-house
 Fidelity Communications Co.
 (Sullivan, Mo.)



Outsourced
 Farmers Telecommunications Cooperative
 (Rainsville, Ala.)

COMPLETE MARKETING CAMPAIGNS

In-house
 OmniTel Communications
 (Nora Springs, Iowa)

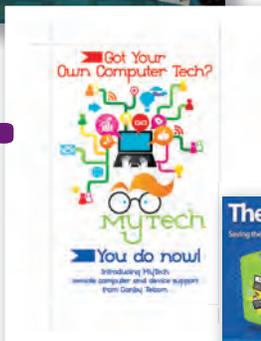


Outsourced
 Farmers Mutual Telephone Co.
 (Fruitland, Idaho)



In-house
 Big Bend Telephone Co.
 (Alpine, Texas)

Outsourced
 Canby Telcom
 (Canby, Ore.)



Outsourced
 Farmers Telephone Cooperative
 (Kingstree, S.C.)

In-house
 Fidelity Communications Co.
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For more information about the NTCA TeleChoice Awards and how you can participate, visit www.ntca.org/telechoiceawards.



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EXCHANGE

SEPTEMBER-OCTOBER 2013



In 3-2-1: Live With 'HTC Supports'

By Tennille Shields, NTCA Senior Writer/Editor,
and Nicole Hyman, HTC Senior Marketing Coordinator

Looking for a way to give back to its local communities, Horry Telephone Cooperative (HTC; Conway, S.C.) recently partnered with the local Texas Rangers affiliate, the Myrtle Beach Pelicans, to sponsor "Make a Splash Monday."

Throughout the 2013 season, HTC and the baseball team encouraged the community to contribute nonperishable food items at the 11 Monday home games to help support the "Backpack Buddies" program for the 2013-14 school year. The goal of this program is to provide food, books, clothing and school supplies to the children of the working poor in Horry County so they have the tools to succeed outside of school hours.

The company promoted this initiative through its "HTC Supports" local television programming. The segment highlighted the sponsorship with the Pelicans, an HTC employee donation of more than 900 nonperishable items, and a Co-Op Cup Employee Golf Tournament donation of \$6,700. Those donations do not include the monetary contributions and items received at the baseball games during the season. Season totals were not available at the time of Exchange publication; however, 4,361 backpacks of food have been distributed to date as a result of the Make a Splash Monday donations.

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Showing Customers the Power of Broadband

By Carissa Swenson, TechTECS,
LLC, Owner & Technology Specialist

Fiber-to-the-home projects are the big buzz in the telecommunications industry. Higher-speed bandwidth for Web surfing and high-definition television are just two of the great features of fiber optics. However, as Ron Hinds, general manager of Grand River Mutual Telephone Co. (Princeton, Mo.), said recently, "Unlike the movies, if you build it, they won't come."

If you are thinking that by just building out fiber to all your customers they will be banging down your doors to sign up, you are mistaken. Why would your customers buy something that they don't understand? It is important that your customers are educated about what fiber can do to improve their Internet and television watching experiences.

It all starts with the basics. In a recent community training, a husband and wife attended an Internet for beginners course offered by Consolidated Telecommunications Cooperative (Dickinson, N.D.). When speaking to the trainer, they informed her that the reason they hadn't signed up for Internet in the recent build out of fiber to their home was because they don't have an email address and figured they couldn't use the Internet without one.

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Marquette-Adams: Small Cooperative, Big Impact

By Jenna Giese, Marquette-Adams Telephone Cooperative Newsletter Editor and Author

Marquette-Adams Telephone Cooperative (MATC) is a telecommunications provider located in rural Wisconsin that is working toward leaving a lasting impression on its surrounding communities and businesses. MATC has established an economic development program, designed to offer financial grant opportunities to businesses within the cooperative's serving area. Through this effort, MATC maintains close-knit relationships with its constituents, as well as promotes the local economy.

Since its establishment in 1952, MATC, headquartered in Oxford, Wis. (population 600), has given back to the people in its community by distributing profits back to its patrons. MATC has gone beyond the customary distribution of these funds, however, to target improvement of the fiscal health in the cooperative's territory through its economic development program.

Wisconsin allows unclaimed capital credits to be used for charitable causes. Through utilization of these funds and channeling them through a regional economic development office, MATC has awarded over \$90,000 in grants in the past five years to 12 businesses in its service area, resulting in the strengthening of community bonds and encouragement of local commerce. The cooperative has enthusiastically supported both new industry and existing establishments. These grants have created the possibility for

recipients to increase efficiency, provide new offerings to potential customers, expand their businesses and, in some cases, open their doors for the first time.

MATC understands that the foundation of a thriving local economy is access to educational materials and information. It is with this understanding that it granted two libraries within its coverage territory \$25,000 for new building expenses and the acquisition of laptops, furniture, books and other materials to make a more accommodating and comfortable learning environment for patrons and staff. The cooperative also aided three new area businesses in opening their doors to the public. Providing more than \$20,000 in initial construction expenses to these businesses allowed them to open sooner to begin providing services to local patrons. Other grant allocations have included supplying a local kennel and pet shelter with \$10,000 to purchase a geothermal heating system; granting a flower shop, specialty retailer and a local fresh food market with nearly \$15,000 for expansion purposes; and awarding two automotive repair businesses with funds totaling \$15,000 for equipment upgrades.

As it has done in the past, MATC will provide opportunities to local businesses in the form of commercial development in the future. Creating possibilities for rural economic and residential growth demonstrates the true cooperative spirit.

Marquette-Adams will continue to operate with the mindset that a cooperative's success is dependent on the success of its members, and it will provide quality connections, not only in telecommunications service but also in community service—today, tomorrow, and always. [E](#)



MATC supports Harvest Market, a local grocer that expanded its operations to provide fresh bread daily.



Expressions in Bloom, a family owned and operated company, serves the Oxford area.

It Takes a Village

By Kurt Gruending, Waitsfield and Champlain Valley Telecom, Vice President of Marketing and Business Development

As part of ongoing congressional outreach efforts, Waitsfield and Champlain Valley Telecom (WCVT; Waitsfield, Vt.) hosts congressional staffers once or twice a year at its telco headquarters.

This year, in collaboration with its local chamber of commerce, WCVT arranged for representatives from the offices of Sens. Patrick J. Leahy (D-Vt.) and Bernard Sanders (I-Vt.), as well as Rep. Peter Welch (D-Vt.), to visit the Mad River Valley on June 26. The congressional staffers met with representatives of the Mad River Valley Chamber of Commerce, Central Vermont Economic Development Committee, Lake Champlain Regional Chamber of Commerce and local businesspeople to discuss business issues, including in-depth discussions regarding broadband connectivity and rural challenges.



The meeting was held at WCVT's central office. Following the official meeting, the group toured several local businesses, including the Mad River Food Hub, Liz Lovely, Historic Bridge Street and Green Mountain Harvest Hydroponics.

WCVT was represented by Gregg Haskin, president and chief executive officer; Roger Nishi, vice president of industry relations; and Kurt Gruending, vice president of marketing and business development, and also a board member of the Mad River Valley Chamber of Commerce. ☰



Representatives of the Vermont congressional delegation visit the Mad River Valley region to meet with local leaders and businesspeople regarding rural broadband opportunities and challenges.

Showing Customers the Power of Broadband *from page 45*

Being misinformed is not uncommon among those who haven't been exposed to the Internet and what it can do. By the end of the training, the couple had found many reasons they should get Internet in their home and were excited to do so.

As another example, a company based in Maine has been providing education to farmers and fishermen on how broadband can help their businesses. The company has even gone so far as to hire a full-time trainer to offer free classes to county residents. These classes are located at its main offices in classrooms built for that purpose. The company also has a mobile lab that it takes out to its more rural communities so that classes can be offered at a more convenient location.

Information is a powerful tool, and by showing the many free Web-based applications that are available online, you can help potential customers

see the value of the service. In the past, customers had to purchase software for their computers to do word processing, create spreadsheets, play games, create digital scrapbooks, edit photos and much more. By showing them that these tasks can now be done with an Internet-ready device and high-speed Internet connection, and by educating them about where they can find these applications online, they no longer have to purchase the expensive software packages.

There are many ways that education can help to entice your customers to sign up for Internet packages you provide. The key is finding which method works best for your company and your community. Regardless of how you go about it, by focusing on the customer and how fiber can change their lives, you will be gaining those customers who never thought the Internet was for them. ☰

Editor's Note:
Carissa Swenson will be speaking at the upcoming NTCA Fall Conference and Region 6 Meeting.

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.

In 3-2-1: Live With 'HTC Supports' from page 45

Over the years, HTC has had great success generating engaging local content while showcasing various initiatives through its television program "HTC Supports." Launched in the fall of 2009, the program has been an effective way to educate the community about various community resources and programs that HTC supports.

"Local content is essential for HTC to connect with the community and members it serves," said Nicole Hyman, HTC senior marketing coordinator. 'HTC Supports' segments are used to highlight some of the internal and external programs HTC has in place and to emphasize the local connection it maintains with the community, whether it's through employee or corporate involvement. The goal with each feature is to communicate how HTC supports initiatives in the communities in which we work and live."

The producer of the "HTC Supports" program also serves as the host. And with the help of the marketing team and Brandon Advertising, topics are chosen based on the events and activities HTC is supporting throughout the year at any given time, Hyman shared.

The first topic for the program focused on the dangers of distracted driving and included a panel of college students from nearby Coastal Carolina University. Since then, the company has featured an assortment of topics, such as environmental



awareness, education, charitable giving and athletics.

HTC is a longtime benefactor of all chambers of commerce in Horry and Georgetown counties. The telco has provided monetary donations for events, as well as thousands of volunteer hours through employee service and participation on numerous boards and committees.

In January, HTC formed a partnership with the North Myrtle Beach Chamber of Commerce to facilitate business training opportunities for chamber members. One of the business training sessions HTC provided was "Connecting Through Social Media." HTC training team members collaborated with the marketing team to develop each session, which was then showcased on an "HTC Supports" segment. ☰

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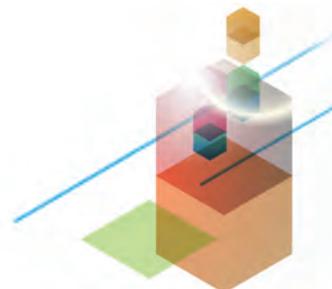
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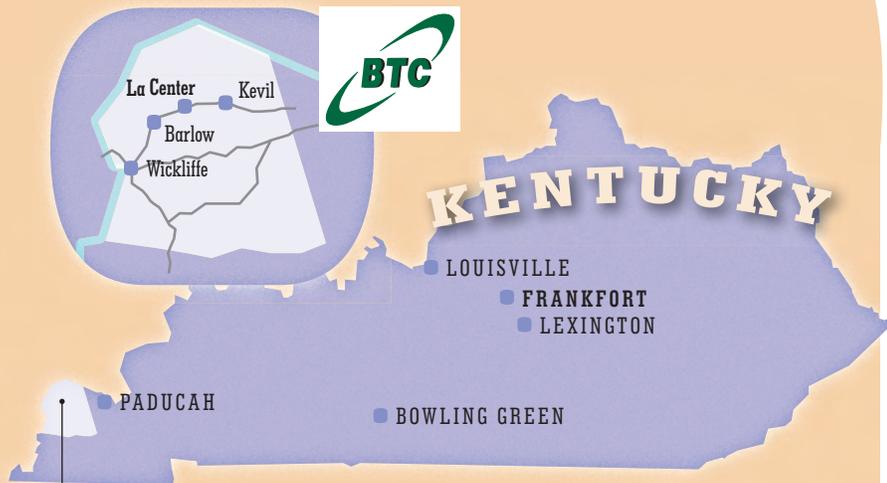
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BY JENNY MALLORY

Ballard Rural Telephone Cooperative Corp. (BTC)

La Center, KY.



Service Territory

We have almost 5,000 access lines and seven exchanges. We serve all of Ballard County (population of entire county is around 8,000) and a portion of McCracken County (considered West McCracken County). Our office is located in La Center, Ky. We serve La Center, Heath, Kevil, Bandana, Barlow, Gage and Wickliffe.

NTCA
Member Since
1961

General
Manager/
Chief Executive
Officer:
Harlon E.
Parker

History

Ballard County is located in extreme western Kentucky, at the confluence of the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers. It is bordered by the Ohio River on the north and the Mississippi River on the west. Wickliffe is our county seat.

We have one elementary school, middle school and high school, all on one campus.

We are under excellent management, and we are guided by a dedicated board of trustees. Our employees work as a team and really take very seriously the challenges of this ever-changing industry.

Ballard Rural Telephone was the first telco in Kentucky and the second in the nation to offer its customers single-line service.

Customer service will always be the most important quality of our cooperative. Our customers are our friends, church members, family and neighbors. Our customers know our employees by name and call us at



home if they need anything. We wouldn't have it any other way.

We pride ourselves on community involvement, such as the Ballard County Fair, Relay for Life, school involvement, Chamber of Commerce and many other activities.

Technology

With the changes in the telecom industry, our role has expanded to much more than just having a telephone. Technology has played a huge role in our high-speed Internet service and TV. We are working on installing fiber to the home in our third exchange. We believe it is not a choice to change with technology. It is a must! Fiber was an easy decision for us; the execution is much harder. We know it is a must for our customers.



Workforce

We have 28 employees. That number has been very consistent over the years, although job titles have changed with the increase of technology. We have had contractors in and out over the years with our fiber-to-the-home construction project.



Customer Profile

Our customer base has changed over the years just by getting older. Our area isn't very diverse yet. We have a majority of American citizens.

We still require landline service to have our TV and DSL services. As more competition has come in and we were required to raise our rates, we lost many landlines, which took our customer base down.



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