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The Power of Data-Driven Marketing
By Jennifer Lubell

In the days before forward-looking technologies and services, companies often based their upgrade decisions on the quality of the copper plant rather than customer usage and needs. The last few years have seen data technology become more cost-effective, allowing companies to better gauge the experience their members are having on their network. Find out how rural-broadband marketing has been transformed by the new era of data-driven marketing.

Nailing the Niche: How Telcos Tap Trends and Drive Diversification
By Tara Young

Because of their commitment to service, many rural broadband companies cultivate a wide perspective on various trends while retaining a sharp focus on fitting trends to their core customer base. By finding this inflection point, rural broadband companies translate larger trends into niche services for their customers—pursuing trends that fill service gaps and make their communities richer, more diversified and more vibrant areas.

Focus on the Future: What’s on the Horizon for an Industry ‘in the Sunshine’?
By Laura Withers

What does the telco of the future look like? The answer to that question appeared relatively clear in 1995, according to a report by a group of 20 rural telecom industry leaders comprising the first NTCA Futures Committee charged with predicting what the telco of 2005 would look like. More than 20 years later, the second such Futures Task Force found the question a bit more difficult to answer.
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A Promoted Tweet Shows How Marketing Tactics Are Changing

By Christian Hamaker, Editor

“It’s easy to make good decisions with good data.”

That quote from Dean Carter, marketing manager at Pioneer Telephone Cooperative (Kingfisher, Okla.)—part of this issue’s cover story on data-driven marketing (“The Power of Data-Driven Marketing,” p. 18)—had me nodding along as I read it, and it got me thinking about the effective marketing I’ve encountered as a consumer. What messages garnered a response from me? And how did advertisers know how, when and where to reach me?

Those answers can be mysterious at times from a consumer perspective, but as our cover story shows, businesses are turning marketing into a science, refining their techniques for targeting messages to current and potential customers. The rise of web analytics, savvy email programs and workers who know how to employ new technologies has made marketing more data-driven—and more effective.

At home, I'm on a two-year contract for landline phone and internet service. When the internet connection is due for renewal and I receive a rate-hike notice, I call the provider to see if I can negotiate my way out of the price hike. I once could, but the company has changed tactics. I now usually accept the $5-or-so monthly fee increase in exchange for increased upload/download speeds. The provider's data allows it to see my family's increasing usage patterns (multiple kids with devices that compete for capacity), so it knows I'll likely take the offer. And I do.

An “old-fashioned” phone call isn’t the only way companies have succeeded in getting me to buy their wares. There’s also social media—a “dynamic platform that allows for quick response time and is much less expensive than traditional forms of marketing,” according to Bethany Chinadle, vice president of customer operations at Triangle Communications (Havre, Mont.), as quoted in our cover story. I spend a lot of time on Twitter, and that’s where, last summer, a national newspaper I follow on that platform got me to click on its promoted offer: a 50% discount for a year off the price of the paper's print edition. The company surely knew how quickly I was using my limited click allotment on the paper's site each month. A paid subscription would get me unlimited clicks. I just needed an incentive to subscribe, and the paper’s promoted tweet did the trick.

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So, that was a marketing success, at least in the short term. But a funny thing happened after I received unlimited access to the paper's site. I stopped visiting as frequently as I once had. Though the paper hadn’t declined in quality, once I knew I could access its articles freely, the desire to do so dissipated.

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My year-long subscription to the paper ends in late July. I wonder, with the data the paper has gleaned about me in the past 12 months, what special offer might come my way when I contact the company to cancel—and whether, through their data-driven marketing, they’ll have enough new information to make me an offer I can’t refuse.
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A Rural-State Rebound for Manufacturing?

We’re Getting More Sleep. But Are We Getting Enough?

For years we’ve heard the advice: Get more sleep. Studies have shown the health benefits of a good night’s sleep and the consequences—including weight gain, lack of focus and increased diabetes risk—of a bad night’s sleep. But how much more sleep do we need?

Americans average more than eight hours of sleep on weeknights, and that duration is growing. Over 13 years, beginning in 2013, researchers at the University of Pennsylvania said federal survey data show that people gained 1.4 minutes of sleep per weeknight—a total of 18 more minutes of sleep on weeknights during the study. On weekend nights, Americans gained an additional 50 seconds each year, for a total gain of approximately 11 minutes.

The extra sleep came from slightly earlier bedtimes and shifts in TV watching. While people watched 30 more seconds of TV during weekdays each year throughout the survey, people watching TV or movies before bed dipped 0.22%.

Source: nytimes.com

Your Future Customers Are Online. Is That a Good Thing?

Kids are your future customers, and they’re engaging your content digitally. That may be good for business, but is it good for the kids?

Kids’ internet access has skyrocketed since 2010, when Apple launched the iPad. Forty percent of children age 0–8 have a tablet today, up from 1% in 2011, and 10% of the same age group owns a “smart” toy that connects to the internet.

But critics worry that young minds are not mature enough to use technology well. And those critics are raising their profile, hosting conferences on tech addiction among kids and stepping up their lobbying efforts with policymakers.

Source: axios.com
Hello, Future. Goodbye, Text.

Enjoy reading prose while you can. We’re heading toward a post-text future.

Farhad Manjoo said text won’t disappear entirely, but online culture is turning sounds and images into the universal language of tomorrow.

“The internet was born in text because text was once the only format computers understood,” Manjoo wrote. “Then we started giving machines eyes and ears—that is, smartphones were invented—and now we’ve provided them brains to decipher and manipulate multimedia.”

All those pictures and sounds are altering how we think. “An information system dominated by pictures and sounds prizes emotion over rationality,” Manjoo wrote. “It’s a world where slogans and memes have more sticking power than arguments. ... But what are we going to do? There seems no going back now. For text, the writing is on the wall.”

College Falls Out of Favor in Rural America

Who’s missing from America’s colleges? Rural high school graduates.

That’s the conclusion of Jon Marcus and Matt Krupnick, who wrote that only 59% of rural high school graduates (white and nonwhite, across all income levels) attend college the fall after graduation, compared with 62% of urban and 67% of suburban graduates. Among all 18–24-year-olds, 42% are currently enrolled in institutes of higher education, compared with just 29% of rural people in the same age range and 48% from cities.

Rural students score better than urban students on the National Assessment of Educational Progress, so why the lower college enrollment rate? Historically, rural industries like farming, mining and timber-harvesting required no college degree.

With the decline of those industries, a hopelessness has taken hold. Forty percent of rural white men believe their children will have a lower standard of living than they did, according to Pew Research Center, and the National Rural Education Association points to drug and mental-health issues, poverty and a lack of high-speed internet access in rural America as feeding a sense of pessimism. ● Source: npr.org
Keith Holden is the new chief executive officer (CEO)/general manager (GM) at ATMC (Shallotte, N.C.). He has been with the company since 1998, most recently as vice president of information systems.

Range Cos. (Montana and Wyoming) selected Rob Johnstone as its new CEO for the corporation.

Northwest Communications Cooperative (Ray, N.D.) hired Jennifer Bingeman as its chief financial officer.

North Central Rural Telephone (Lafayette, Tenn.) promoted Johnny McClanahan to serve as its GM/CEO.

Jill Kuehny replaced Dana Pierce as CEO at KanOkla Networks (Caldwell, Kan.) following Pierce’s retirement.

Todd Van Epps replaced Trish Carroll as GM at Columbus Telephone Co. (Columbus, Kan.) following Carroll’s retirement.

Julie Kolka is the new GM at Mabel Cooperative Telephone Co. (Mabel, Minn.) following the death of GM Lorren Tingesdal.

Carol Olson replaced the retired Lenny Leis as GM of Coon Valley Farmers Telephone Cooperative (Coon Valley, Wis.).

Kristi Westbrock is the new CEO/GM at Consolidated Telephone Co. (Brainerd, Minn.), succeeding Kevin Larson, who retired at the end of June.

Desk Dilemma: Stand or Sit?

You’ve heard of the standing desk—a relatively recent revolution in office furniture. Standing while working, we were told by standing-desk proponents, would relieve back pain and increase alertness.

But—are you sitting down?—it turns out the standing desk may not be all it was cracked up to be. Curtin University researchers in Australia studied 20 adults who used standing desks, and determined that “over time, discomfort increased in all body areas.”

Their findings, published in the journal Ergonomics, show that “prolonged standing should be undertaken with caution.”

Source: nydailynews.com

Universities Accommodate Wi-Fi Fever

Today’s college students want ubiquitous Wi-Fi, and universities are trying to provide it. Among the schools building out Wi-Fi networks:

- Elon University in North Carolina is midway through a conversion of all residence halls to wireless-only. Elon also has created two Wi-Fi networks—one for mobile phones and printers, and another for gaming consoles and smart devices.

- Rowan College at Gloucester County, a 266-acre New Jersey community college, is updating Wi-Fi space by space, focusing on traffic-heavy areas like the cafeteria, where students use multiple wireless devices.

- Ohio State University approved an $18.6 million campuswide Wi-Fi update.

- The University of Michigan’s Ann Arbor campus is nearing the end of a $24.5 million Wi-Fi upgrade.

- Dakota Wesleyan University is responding to a survey that showed 90% of students in residence halls said they’d be willing to give up cable TV subscriptions for better Wi-Fi. Source: insidehighered.com
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@usdaRD can help fund new infrastructure projects and infrastructure expansion projects to provide rural farms, homes, and businesses with access to reliable broadband.

@sarahlhallNC
Great #ruralday2018 agenda! Looking forward to the upcoming panel on rural broadband solutions.

@Sen_JoeManchin
This morning I hosted @FCC officials in Charleston to discuss the Challenge Process for Mobility Fund II, a $4.5 billion program that will help broadband companies better serve rural communities in #WV with high-speed broadband.

@SenatorTomUdall
I’m committed to expanding broadband access and closing the digital divide that hurts too many rural New Mexico communities, Tribes and low-income families.

@RobWittman
There is tremendous opportunity to improve the quality of life and utilize the untapped human capital of those currently without internet service in rural America.
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A Roaring Start to 2018

2018 began with a roar: The new Universal Service Fund (USF) budget control mechanism was announced. Nearly 200 members of Congress shared their support for long-term USF budget sufficiency in letters to the FCC. NTCA staff and members continue to testify at hearings on Capitol Hill. Work on the Farm Bills in the House and Senate is ongoing. And those are just a few of the reasons it’s been a whirlwind first half of 2018. Long-term USF budget sufficiency and coordination among federal broadband-focused programs are our advocacy themes this year. Thanks for staying on the roller coaster with us!

Shirley Bloomfield

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

Telling the Rural Broadband Story on Capitol Hill

It’s always a treat to be invited to share the rural broadband story on Capitol Hill. 2017 brought a record number of opportunities for NTCA members and staff to testify, and 2018 has followed a similar pace. No matter the topic—from infrastructure to small business challenges and agriculture—if rural broadband is involved, it’s a great opportunity to share that the initial business case for deployment must be made and that the USF is the linchpin of that business case. NTCA has a seat at the table and leverages it to move the needle on rural broadband policy.

Rural Gig Going Strong

Three years ago, NTCA launched its Gig-Capable Provider certification program to acknowledge the work of our members to deliver gigabit broadband speeds and enable innovation in rural communities across the nation. This May we recognized our 150th Certified Gig-Capable Provider, Blue Valley Telecommunications of Home, Kan., with (what else?) a celebratory cake. I take my hat off to all our Certified Gig-Capable Providers for the work you do. This milestone is a testament to the diligent efforts of small rural providers to build a better broadband future for rural America. Check out our certified providers or apply at www.ntca.org/gigcertified.

Part-ner-ships

As most of you know, I am a big fan of collaboration. And over the years, I’ve seen firsthand how innovation is spurred when we put our heads together to solve a problem. That is why I was so pleased to see the NTCA Board of Directors establish a task force on telco-electric relationships. This task force is focused on exploring how telcos and electric co-ops can coexist and work alongside each other to bridge the digital divide, while avoiding costly overbuilding of robust, existing broadband facilities. In April we had the pleasure of meeting with Jannine Miller of the U.S. Department of Agriculture to discuss infrastructure and broadband initiatives. The exchange of ideas was lively, and I am looking forward to creating a platform that will offer these providers creative ideas on achieving a win-win. There is a lot of work ahead for this group, but the possibilities are endless.
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How long have you been with Peoples Telephone Cooperative?
I have been with the company seven years.

Your company has a strong community-outreach operation. Tell us about a recent highlight.
We know how important our business is to local nonprofit organizations. We often donate and sponsor events, but we also take time to do fundraising with our employees to give back.

This Christmas at our company party, instead of random gift giving to our staff, we did a charity bucket raffle. Employees received tickets for being in attendance but they could purchase additional tickets as well. All the proceeds went to the Quitman Rainbow Room. We surprised them with a $1,000 check right after the holidays.

Peoples also makes an effort to highlight local businesses in its magazine. Can you share the results of a recent promotion?
Speakeasy coffee shop was a cover story and feature article in the March/April edition of the Peoples Connection magazine. Since its story ran in our magazine the store’s sales have increased 12%. The owner, Kelly Keike, has also visited with customers that have gone out of their way to visit our town and Speakeasy because of the article. Twelve ladies stopped in one Saturday while traveling from a neighboring town. When Kelly asked how they had heard about Speakeasy, one of the ladies said that a magazine got delivered to her house by accident and she read it, made notes and then gave it to her neighbor. Then she planned a trip to the area to stop by and see firsthand what she had read about.

Kelly also mentioned that she has been asked for her autograph about three dozen times. These are just a few of the good things happening in her business due to the magazine.
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The Power of Data-Driven Marketing

By Jennifer Lubell
Data analytics has opened up a whole new world for rural telcos.

Google, billing analysis and other data-driven strategies make it possible to fine-tune marketing campaigns, improve customer experience and yield a bigger return on investment.

In the days before forward-looking technologies and services, many in the rural broadband industry relied on the “build it and they will come” adage, according to Bethany Chinadle, vice president of customer operations at Triangle Communications (Havre, Mont.), which serves about 24,000 square miles in Montana and has approximately 12,300 members. Companies often based their upgrade decisions on the quality of the copper plant rather than customer usage and needs. Marketing was done as mass messaging, with the hope that the company would reach a few members with this approach.

The last few years have been a game changer, however. Data technology has become much more cost-effective, allowing companies like Triangle—and not just the Googles or Amazons of the world—to better gauge the experience their members are having on their network.

Triangle started using data-driven marketing in May of 2017 and immediately saw a 26% gain in marketing investment efficiency. Having the data at its fingertips allows Triangle to effectively target the customers it wants to reach and optimize the message it’s delivering. “With the data, we can see customers who are a high probability to upgrade to a higher service tier based on their existing usage,” Chinadle said.
Data’s Teachable Moments

For rural telcos that don’t know where to start, switching to data-driven marketing may seem like an overwhelming task. As some companies discover, there’s often a learning curve.

You don’t need to know all of the answers or start with an all-encompassing plan. Bethany Chinadle of Triangle Communications advised, “Pick one piece to focus on and then try another. Don’t let perfect be the enemy of the good.” It’s great to have perfect data on 100% of your members, but even 75% is a much better place to be than having no data at all.

“Try not to go in with preconceived notions of what the data should be telling you. Keep an open mind,” Chinadle advised.

Triangle discovered this after it spent money advertising on “hip and cool” platforms that weren’t returning much on investment. “When we looked at the data, we realized that almost no one in our service area was using that service. So we immediately shifted dollars away from that platform and focused more on Facebook, where we had much better engagement.”

It’s easy in these situations to let your ego get in the way and say, “No, I’ve made this investment and I’m sticking with it. However, based on what your data tells you, you need to be willing to change your marketing strategies and plans to better utilize your marketing budgets,” Chinadle said.

Mapping Customer Needs

Depending on where your customers live, data has made it easier to map their experiences, said Dean Carter, marketing manager of Pioneer Telephone Cooperative (Kingfisher, Okla.). The company serves about 140,000 wireless and broadband revenue-generating units (RGUs) in Oklahoma and Kansas.

Rural America is getting leaner every day, Carter said. In Oklahoma, fewer people are staying in the rural western area to raise families, for example. When they do move away, the distance between each farm or ranch becomes farther and farther apart, making it more costly to install services like fiber optics with high-speed internet and DTV. “It’s not practical to take products door to door,” Carter said. “This is where data comes into play, to maximize those efforts.”

Pioneer draws from its internal billing system to find out more about the demographics and buying habits of its customers. As a company that does a tremendous amount of advertising, the data helps guide its marketing budget and whether it should be targeting women in their 30s as opposed to women in their 60s, for example. A landing page on its website provides live action on buying habits.

“Using Google Analytics, we can measure live data much more effectively and know if our marketing dollars are producing results. If they are not, we can change the tactic instantly and target a new set of data, age, sex, geography, income, etc.,” Carter said. His team also occasionally compares and contrasts its in-house data with those from Google Analytics to get additional perspective.

Through Google, the company can understand a great many things about the customer: the demographic, new versus returning, mobile versus desktop, time of day, and where the customer came from—direct, organic, referral, social media, bounce rate, pages visited, or time on site, according to Carter.

The Pioneer team encourages its customers to use its GoPioneer.com website for e-commerce and portal access. Existing customers can access their accounts for autopay and usage information. New and existing customers can see promotions, upgrade their accounts and contact Pioneer directly through the website. These touchpoints provide extremely vital data strings that Google Analytics can complement even further.

Pioneer has been able to meet its marketing goals through these strategies. “It’s easy to make good decisions with good data,” Carter said.

Rethinking Tradition

The birth of major broadband and the desire to have more of it has led some companies away from more traditional marketing methods such as billboards, direct mail and telephone. As some companies have discovered, when it comes to outreach, timing is everything.

About a year ago, Pioneer looked at what its data was saying and made a bold decision to get out of print. “Through newspaper circulation we were not hitting new targets,” Carter said. As a technology company that primarily sells smartphones and internet, Pioneer realized it needed to focus its advertising dollars more wisely.

One high-performance area it’s focusing on is the mobile market. Through a landing page on a mobile device, customers can click to a fillable form that sends them information on a brand new Samsung device. If you know that your customers are on a mobile or desktop device at a certain time of day, that’s when you can orchestrate a quality click-through to encourage purchase of new products.

“If a consumer clicks on a mobile ad to find out more about gig broadband to their home, the ad will enable the viewer to go straight to GoPioneer.com to discover more information or use the fillable form to upgrade or purchase,” Carter said.

In his view, this is a much more effective way of marketing devices than a traditional billboard. “It’s about trying to make that digital spend instead of a general branding ad,” he said.

At Triangle, data analysis revealed that it could potentially reach more than 80% of its users via a social media platform ad rather than use costly methods of every door direct mail (EDDM) or print ads. “Social media is a very
dynamic platform that allows for quick response time and is much less expensive than traditional forms of marketing,” Chinadle said.

The company didn’t necessarily change what it did, but how it did it, Chinadle explained. As an example, it was able to boost its Facebook reach from 6,000 to around 15,000 by making a simple tweak: changing the timing of posts.

In the past, the company would post on its social media page as soon as it finished an ad. Now, it looks at the exchange or exchanges it’s targeting to see what day and what time of day the bulk of those exchanges take place on the different social media platforms. “We do the initial post a few hours before the optimal time so our investment in paying to boost the post for added reach starts during the optimal time.’

It may have an ad ready to go live, yet Triangle might wait a day to post it to reach up to 20% more of its members in a certain exchange.

One social media campaign reaped particular dividends. Capitalizing on the fact that Havre was #1 on the Weather Channel’s 5 Worst Winter U.S. Cities of 2017–2018, Triangle decided to post, “Snowed In? Stream Away. Upgrade Your Speed Free for 2 Months,” on the social media site. Within 12 hours it saw a payback on the post $290 in added revenue. There was a 15% rate of clicking on an ad and turning it into a sale.

Triangle also revamped its mailer campaign. Previously, it would spend its marketing budget by doing EDDMs every quarter. Now, it mails to a very select group of members with a targeted message. One mailer, for instance, targeted members served by fiber who stream more than 20 GB a month. “We spent approximately 10% of the cost to do targeted mailers versus doing EDDM. Within two weeks, we had a 3-month [return on investment] for our speed increases using targeted marketing,” Chinadle said.

Without data, Triangle would not have been able to measure the true effects of its campaign or have a real idea of the ROI on the marketing dollars spent, she added.

Mixing Things Up
Data certainly drives change, but it doesn’t always discourage tradition.

SRT Communications Inc. (Minot, N.D.), which serves about 40,000 customers in north central North Dakota, relies on billing software as well as Google and digital marketing tactics to reach customers and track the effectiveness of its marketing messages during campaigns such as internet upgrades.

As far as the data goes, Cassidy Hjelmstad, SRT’s director of corporate communications, believes it’s important to spread the dollars out and find a balance among all forms of media. SRT still uses traditional media such as newspapers, along with digital. “The reason is, we’re unique in that our reach is urban and rural,” she said. In the past, the company used a more generic strategy that covered everyone in its territory.

The company’s data has shown that it makes the most sense to align strategies based on a population’s demographics—regardless of whether the marketing uses traditional media or digital media.

For a security product it sells, SRT knows that urban areas command the highest take rates. “When we target urban areas, we look at single family housing, whether there’s kids or not, and how many people live in the house. That comes from places like census data,” Hjelmstad said.

In some instances, digital media makes sense for an ad campaign. “If we’re doing a smaller campaign for a targeted number of customers, we’ll use more digital, but we may throw in direct mail as well.” It doesn’t always make sense to use TV over newspapers for certain campaigns.
“If we’re focusing on one community, we’ll support our local newspaper as one way to reach those customers and compliment the messages we’re already pushing,” she said.

How Data Drives Financial Decisions

Data doesn’t just drive marketing strategies. It also affects the way telcos prioritize their spending.

Through its use of data, Triangle decided to discontinue an expensive but little used social media platform and increase its social media spend on another social media platform. In exchanges where 75% or more of its members are on social media sites at a given date or time, it decreased its print ad size in newspapers, resulting in a 35% decrease in its print ad spend.

Data-driven marketing has also influenced the way Triangle handles its commissions. "We now tie our monthly commission structure to what we are targeting for the month. We have seen great success tying the commission and marketing plans together," Chinadle said.

While data obviously provides a benefit to providers, this isn’t just about driving revenue, she added. "We want to provide the best possible experience for our members. If they are streaming a bunch of Netflix, that’s not going to be a great experience at 3 MB broadband service."

It’s an investment for sure, but in an age where the internet and mobile devices can expand a telco’s reach to that isolated farm in rural America that wants a high-speed connection, data is becoming an increasingly valuable resource in a telco’s marketing toolbox.

Jennifer Lubell is a freelance writer.
Contact her at jenniferlubell@gmail.com.
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Lines out the door at Whidbey Telecom’s WiFire coffee shop attest to the success of this forward-thinking telco’s combination café and company HQ.
Building for Technology

The technology industry is as susceptible as any other to the impact of trends. Aside from their interest in facilities and internet connections, large tech companies are focused on green technology as they create products, services and processes that are environmentally friendly and socially responsible.

With an eye to the "green" trend and a goal of attracting the companies that follow it, West Kentucky & Tennessee Telecom (WK&T, Mayfield, Ky.) purchased the defunct Mid-Continent University’s campus in Mayfield, Ky., and created the WK&T Tech Park. The 53-acre mixed-use park “allows] WK&T’s network to serve as an economic engine to attract jobs to our region,” according to Chief Executive Officer Trevor Bonnstetter.

The long-term vision for the project, said Chief Operating Officer Karen Jackson-Furman, is to leverage WK&T’s technology with the strength of the Graves County Economic Development Office (EDO) and joint efforts (like a current collaboration with nearby Division 1 school Murray State University) to attract new businesses to the area and encourage expansion of existing businesses. WK&T’s fiber-fed broadband is the linchpin of the park’s technology plan, giving the entire facility gigabit speeds, high redundancy and some of the lowest latency in the nation.

Broadband aside, the site boasts some serious business draws. The park is within a couple hours of several large metropolitan areas, has access to major airports and has more than 100,000 square feet of usable

How Telcos Tap Trends and Drive Diversification

telcos pride themselves on knowing their customers and their service areas. Some companies boast centuries-long connections to their exchanges, bringing a deep, informed understanding of the history and trajectory of the communities they serve. Because of their commitment to service, many telcos cultivate a wide perspective on various trends while retaining a sharp focus on fitting trends to their core customer base. By finding this inflection point, rural telcos translate larger trends into niche services for their customers—pursuing trends that fill service gaps and make their communities richer, more diversified and more vibrant areas.

Employees Jeremy Timmerman (top) and Nick Curley (bottom) of LNE Communications’ subsidiary Lowden Plumbing, Heating and Electrical.
WK&T also worked with the Graves County EDO and the state of Kentucky to designate the entire tech park a Tax Increment Financing (TIF) district. Having a TIF in place makes building in or relocating to the park financially viable for businesses in a range of sizes.

WK&T is using the park as a relocation point itself. By June 2018, it plans to have its warehouse and administration offices at the park, centralizing workspaces that used to be scattered around the company’s service territory. The mixed office/industrial use exemplifies the vision WK&T has for the entire project.

“We really see it as being a flexible space, with an incubator space, hotel, executive extended stay, restaurant, classrooms, fitness center and other entities all housed within a park-like landscape,” said Jackson-Furman. “We’ve had a film company lease portions of the park for a movie they’re filming, and we currently have a local high school and some small businesses leasing office space.”

The park’s attractiveness will grow when WK&T finalizes the purchase of 65 acres of adjacent land this year. That purchase, slated at press time for late spring or early summer, is the new footprint of the park’s solar farm. The farm will fuel the park’s electrical demand, and underscores the environmentally friendly design plans WK&T has for the whole park complex.

“We’re the initiator, with our fiber services and relocation, but this project is bigger than just us,” insisted Jackson-Furman. “It’s about the attraction and retention of talent, and it’s been a catalyst for bringing together local schools and local businesses and local government for the benefit of the local economy.”

Keeping the Lights On
Sometimes benefiting the local economy means ensuring a valuable piece of the business community remains in place, providing jobs and fulfilling the needs of the area it serves. For CEO Jan Muhl of LNE Communications (Lost Nation, Iowa), the decision to diversify by purchasing a contracting business in a neighboring town wasn’t a trend, it was just a good business decision.

“The previous owner of Lowden Plumbing, Heating and Electrical wanted to retire, and wanted a buyer for his business,” explained LNE CEO Jan Muhl. “His goal was to find a local buyer who would continue to operate the business here in our area, and it happened that his type of business aligned with our diversification goal as well. The business was already successful and a great part of our local economy, and we wanted it to keep going.”

LNE’s diversification strategy had been in development for several years, waiting for an opportunity like Lowden to come along. LNE was certainly no stranger to contractor services—in fact, the company had kept a Master Electrician (M.E.) on staff for several years. But their M.E. was approaching retirement age and was interested in paring back his hours to a part-time position. The option to purchase the contracting business seemed like a solid move, and in late November 2016, LNE completed the purchase, establishing Lowden as a wholly-owned subsidiary of LNE while retaining ownership with LNE’s stockholders.

The daily management of Lowden is handled by a site manager who has been with the company for years, with input as needed from Muhl. All operational functions (accounting, ordering, etc.) are run through the LNE offices. Overlapping services like trenching and wiring jobs are billed out as needed between companies, but the structure allows the Lowden business to run, in large part, autonomously.

“We’re happy with how the purchase turned out, and how the business is running. Our stockholders like having Lowden under our umbrella, and our local communities are happy to retain a well-known and respected business,” Muhl said.

Computers, Community and Coffee
Nowhere is the idea of telcos successfully navigating the line between trend and niche service more apparent than in the cozy confines of the WiFire Coffee Bar in Freeland, Wash. WiFire sits inside the Whidbey Telecom office, serving up lattes and Italian sodas as part of what the company calls the “Whidbey Customer Experience Center” and giving locals a taste of superfast internet with Whidbey’s Big Gig fiber service.

Coffee is an essential part of life in the Pacific Northwest, and Whidbey’s capitalized on its universal appeal, making WiFire the “welcome mat” to its experience center. Opened in 2011, the center includes not only WiFire
but a Whidbey Telecom retail and service location, a storefront for a local technology repair shop and a 100-person conference room that’s available for public use. WiFire operates as a wholly-owned subsidiary, but the coffee bar’s management team has worked with Whidbey for years and is as adept at talking latency as they are lattes.

The coffee bar’s tagline—“Coffee. Community. Connectivity”—conveys exactly the convergence between technology, accessibility and the public. Whidbey Co-CEO George Henny was attempting to capture with the WiFire and the larger Experience Center space.

“It’s not enough to ‘bolt on’ a coffee shop,” Henny insisted. “Instead it was important to us to focus on the customer experience. We approached it with a philosophy of how ‘not to be’ a telco or a utility company. Our focus was on connecting the community—friends serving friends through technology, inside an open and inviting physical space. We want WiFire customers to be fed physically with great food and coffee, but also intellectually and emotionally, and to leave the experience feeling enhanced, empowered and inspired.”

That might sound like a tall order for a coffee shop, but the customers have begun weaving the Whidbey customer experience into the fabric of their lives and their community. When Whidbey Island was hit by a strong winter storm in November 2015, WiFire, fueled by the telco’s generators, was one of few places open on the island. When it opened at 6:30 a.m. the morning after the storm, residents were lined up down the street—not so much because of the coffee, but because of the warm, safe and community-centric gathering space WiFire provided and the available gigabit internet that helped more than 160 displaced telecommuters work remotely from the experience center.

“For those three days, we were there for our community when folks needed it most, a beacon of hope in literal darkness until our power was restored,” Henny said. “And that’s what we’re after with WiFire. We want to be known not just as the fastest coffee shop in the world. We want to encourage our customers to thrive in this community.”

Following the Trends—or Not
Technology parks, contracting firms and coffee shops show the large variety of diversification options for telcos. For many, the key is finding a niche option that aligns with their business goals and their customer needs. Because whether that niche service comes as a result of a new trend in technology, customer service or something else, the goal for telcos remains the same: Serve the customer, serve the community. That’s not trendy, that’s just good business.

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What’s on the Horizon for an Industry ‘in the Sunshine’?

FOCUS ON THE FUTURE

What does the telco of the future look like?

The answer to that question appeared relatively clear in 1995, according to a report by a group of 20 rural telecom industry leaders comprising the first NTCA Futures Committee charged with predicting what the telco of 2005 would look like. More than 20 years later, the second such Futures Task Force, convened in late 2016, found the question a bit more difficult to answer.

BY LAURA WITHERS
What’s on the Horizon for an Industry ‘in the Sunshine’?

“That is a $64 million question,” said Dustin Durden, general manager of Pineland Telephone Cooperative, Inc. (Metter, Ga.). “Who would have thought smartphones 10 years ago would be where they are today? We’re morphing into highly competitive businesses that are going to deliver a pipe of data to homes and businesses where it’s going to be consumed by an infinite amount of devices that we haven’t even dreamed up yet.”

Aside from immense technological advances, rural telcos have seen a flurry of changes in the regulatory and business environments in which they operate, leading them to find new ways of tackling financial, competitive and operational challenges. With those challenges grew a strong entrepreneurial spirit and companies that are highly aware and increasingly responsive to the needs of their communities, even as that sometimes requires taking new risks.

Yet, precisely because of the still-evolving sets of changes first glimpsed by the 1995 Futures Committee, the current Futures Task Force concluded that there is no effective way in today’s marketplace to define a “typical” telco. Instead, the group recognized that—even as they share common historical roots, commitment to community and a focus on broadband as a platform for innovation—telcos vary greatly in lines of business and face diversified challenges and opportunities that defy “one-size-fits-all” treatment. The Futures group therefore focused on what they believe NTCA members need to know to prepare their companies for the future—wherever they may happen to be right now as part of a more diversified industry. The task force published what it learned in a report, “A Practical Guide to Charting One’s Own Course,” that is now available on the NTCA website.
Focus on the Future of operating in very rural areas—from which companies could then make their own decisions. The focus then became how best to seek out new forms of ongoing revenue and ways of reducing reliance upon regulatory cost recovery where possible. For many companies represented on the task force, that has meant being open to working with others, introducing new services, and placing a greater emphasis on sales and marketing. Pineland, for example, recently reviewed an opportunity to provide logistical support to FedEx deliveries in its serving territory. Durden laughed when asked if delivering physical packages has any similarity to delivering digital packages, but being open to new opportunities is becoming a way of life for Pineland and other telcos looking to diversify their balance sheets. “It may not be the home run to replace the USF, but if we hit enough singles we can at least offset some of the threat” of any reductions, said Durden.

A Mix of Challenges and Opportunities

As the task force moved from regulatory challenges to other challenges and opportunities, it quickly became clear that there are too many to easily list. Because of this dynamic and the diversity of the membership, they decided to create a matrix that categorizes key challenges and opportunities for future telcos according to several qualifiers, such as overall density of areas served, market size and total revenues. Michael Romano, NTCA senior vice president of industry affairs and business development, facilitated the task force’s work in creating the matrix, which is included in the report.

The matrix is intended to help members self-select the characteristics they think best reflect their respective operations, and then to consider challenges and opportunities arising in...
“While other companies are losing [access] lines like crazy, we have managed to hang onto those. And that only comes from aggressive marketing and having a sales force.”

Kristi Westbrook
General Manager
Consolidated Telephone Co.

connection with those characteristics. Although the challenges facing NTCA member telcos vary greatly, the task force recognized the value of providing a framework for companies to assess their own responses to challenges and opportunities against those of their peers.

“Each member can pick and choose where they fit,” said Romano.

One opportunity the task force identified for companies of all shapes and sizes is building more aggressive sales and marketing functions to help eke out new revenues and sustain current revenues. The task force report contends that today’s rural telcos must be aggressive “order getters” that proactively plan new service offerings, market those offerings in creative ways and look to differentiate themselves from would-be competitors.

CTC has had a direct sales team for more than 10 years, and Westbrook frequently sings its praises to other telco managers.

“While other companies are losing [access] lines like crazy, we have managed to hang onto those,” said Westbrook. “And that only comes from aggressive marketing and having a sales force.”

Seeking Strategic Partnerships

Another area of focus for the task force was telcos’ unique position in national broadband deployment efforts and the opportunities for strategic partnerships with other utilities, municipalities and the government. Among several examples of both success and failure in endeavors by a diverse set of telcos, the report presents three sample case studies portraying the lessons learned by a telco in partnerships with electric co-ops and municipalities.

CTC is in partnerships with two Minnesota electric co-ops, and Westbrook sees more on the horizon as long as the telco keeps bringing telecommunication services to people who need them.

“If you can do that in a whole new area by partnering up with somebody,” Westbrook said, “it completely meets the mission of what we’ve always set out to do.”

For Durden, being open to partnerships means being committed to leveraging the expertise of his company in new and different ways and to working with potential competitors to make the best use of public and private dollars.

“If one calls, I go,” Durden said of receiving calls from and then meeting with potential partners. “I tell my folks all the time, ‘Rural broadband is in the sunshine right now’ and the old saying, ‘make hay while the sun is shining,’ means we need to jump at this opportunity right now because the window is not going to be open for very long.”

Laura Withers is director of communications for NTCA. She can be reached at lwithers@ntca.org
When I visited the folks at Hartelco, located in Northeastern Nebraska, Chief Executive Officer (CEO) Mike Becker informed me that they were in the process of looking for two new office staff who were moving on. This scenario highlights the importance of having a reliable vendor who can service multiple telecommunication needs.

**InnoStream™ Replaces Multiple Video Platforms**

Bill McGregor, plant and network manager for Hartelco, said switching to InnoCryption™, the Encryption service from Innovative Systems, helped alleviate a situation where they needed to support extra servers just for Encryption. After a server failure, the decision was made to look at a solution that could consolidate video services on one platform, and that led them to the InnoStream™.

McGregor added that the long-standing relationship with Innovative Systems and their IPTV Middleware made it very attractive because all the service management could still be done from the same Graphical User Interface (GUI).

**New Server Deployment Was Pain Free**

McGregor said installation was quick and did not require on-site vendor support. Once power was applied and the fiber links were connected to the core router, the system was up and running, and InnoStream was just another selection dropdown from the existing APMAX GUI.

**Is There a Business Case for Smaller Providers?**

Putting in new hardware for communication companies, especially smaller ones, is sometimes hard to justify, but according to McGregor who penciled in the numbers on what they would save on Encryption with fewer servers and support contracts, it was worth it. Cloud DVR, another feature on InnoStream, allows them to move away from premise DVRs and provides another avenue of savings with a single-platform approach to video service.

McGregor totally understands why Innovative Systems is moving many of the service functions off the APMAX and moving them over to the InnoStream. He says it isn’t even reasonable to expect 10-year old hardware to keep pace with today’s applications.

He adds that with video technology moving so quickly, new things may be coming down the pipeline that will ride on InnoStream, and Hartelco would be able to add another software load to the system without purchasing more hardware or without adding another vendor to their network.
InnoStream InnoCryption Provides Seamless Management and Control

What McGregor likes about the Encryption service is fewer interfaces to the core router, which allows for an easier maintenance path to troubleshoot any encrypted channels.

Once the InnoStream hardware is in place and running, the Encryption flows right through to the Middleware management from Innovative Systems, making setup times for encrypting channels minimal. He says that InnoCryption is very similar to Innovative’s other video products—simple and intuitive.

The biggest advantage of a single-source solution, according to McGregor, is the elimination of vendor finger pointing. He says any time he has questions about middleware, encryption, set-top box software, or cloud DVR, it takes just one phone call to a support person at Innovative.

Longtime Video Partnership

According to Becker, “Anytime we have had an idea for improving the video product, the team at Innovative Systems has been responsive to it.”

Becker adds, “Our video relationship with Innovative goes back to 2011, and we have always been pleased with the efforts to continuously upgrade the software. These consistent upgrades over the years have made the product easier to maintain and support as well as providing our customers with new features to enhance their video experience.”
Whether you’re a vendor looking to exhibit or an attendee seeking solutions to propel your business toward efficiency, innovation and more, EXPO at RTIME 2019 is bound to have what you’re looking for.

The Rural Telecom Industry Meeting & Expo brings more than 2,100 telco professionals together in one place for the largest convergence of the most innovative industry minds. The 2019 event takes place in one of our liveliest cities—New Orleans, February 3–6. It’s the one 2019 event you do not want to miss.

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40% of the show floor is already sold, and we guarantee your current and future customers will be present, as well as your competition. So, book your space today at www.ntca.org/expo2019.

Get Hyped
- Expo Plus is back by popular demand. The debut of Expo Plus at RTIME 2018 was a showstopper, offering one-on-one scheduled consultation meetings for that personal connection.
- New to Expo at RTIME 2019 is Expo Live! Some of the most innovative solutions providers will be taking center stage to introduce and/or demonstrate hot technologies currently on the market.
- Become a part of the Inner Circle with top-level sponsorships.

The Numbers Driving Your Leads
- 74% Independent ILEC Representation
- 20% Executives
- 5% Statewide network
Some of the top business services that NTCA member companies provide:

- Broadband
- Business Networking Services
- Fixed Broadband
- Local Facilities-Based Voice
- IPTV
- Cloud Computing

For more information on EXPO at RTIME 2019, visit [www.ntca.org/expo2019](http://www.ntca.org/expo2019), or contact Michele Coleman at mcoleman@ntca.org or (703) 351-2089.
The annual awards program honors excellence in member telco public relations and marketing. Entries in six categories—complete branding campaign, complete marketing campaign, customer newsletter, local video content, single-target print publication and website—were judged on innovative strategies, design, writing, creativity and other elements specific to each category. In each category, a winner was selected from three divisions based on the number of access lines served by the entrant and two production divisions: “in-house” and “outsourced.”

NTCA Chief Executive Officer Shirley Bloomfield congratulated the winners and participants for their incredible work. In a press release, Bloomfield said, “The marketing efforts of NTCA member companies continue to play a critical role in educating and raising awareness of communications technologies, services, initiatives and issues that impact the vitality of rural communities and our nation.”

See pp. 37–39 for a full list of winners followed by a sampling of their great work!
CONGRATULATIONS!

COMPLETE BRANDING CAMPAIGN
- Arctic Slope Telephone Association Cooperative, Inc. (Anchorage, Alaska) Outsourced Production
- Dakota Central Telecommunications (Carrington, N.D.) Outsourced Production
- Arvig (Perham, Minn.) In-House Production
- Twin Lakes Telephone Cooperative Corporation (Gainesboro, Tenn.) Outsourced Production

COMPLETE MARKETING CAMPAIGN
- Wabash Communications CO-OP (Louisville, Ill.) In-house Production
- Liberty Communications (West Liberty, Iowa) Outsourced Production
- BTC Broadband (Bixby, Okla.) In-house Production
- Silver Star Communications (Freedom, Wyo.) Outsourced Production
- Shentel (Edinburg, Va.) In-house Production
- Twin Lakes Telephone Cooperative Corporation (Gainesboro, Tenn.) Outsourced Production

CUSTOMER NEWSLETTER
- Farmer's Mutual Telephone Company (Fruitland, Idaho) Outsourced Production
- DirectLink (Canby, Ore.) In-house Production
- OmniTel Communications (Nora Springs, Iowa) In-house Production
- Garden Valley Telephone Company (Erskine, Minn.) In-house Production
- Alliance Communications Cooperative (Garretson, S.D.) Outsourced Production
- West Carolina Rural Telephone Cooperative, Inc. (Abbeville, S.C.) Outsourced Production
- Vernon Communications Cooperative (Westby, Wis.) In-house Production
- Peoples Rural Telephone Cooperative (McKee, Ky.) Access Lines, Outsourced Production
- DTC Communications (Alexandria, Tenn.) In-house Production

SINGLE-TARGET PRINT PUBLICATION
- West Central Telephone (Sebeka, Minn.) Outsourced Production
- BCT (Oregon City, Ore.) In-house Production
- OmniTel Communications (Nora Springs, Iowa) Outsourced Production
- Nemont (Williston, N.D.) In-house Production
- North Central Telephone Cooperative (Scottsville, Ky.) Outsourced Production

WEBSITE
- Nortex Communications (Muenster, Texas) Outsourced Production
- Norvado (Cable, Wis.) In-house Production
- Vernon Communications Cooperative (Westby, Wis.) Outsourced Production
- Triangle Communications (New Holland, Pa.) In-house Production
- Golden West Telecommunications (Wall, S.D.) Outsourced Production
Avoiding Social Engineering & Phishing Attacks

Malicious attacks occur online every day. Are you a victim? It's important that you never give out sensitive information to others unless you are sure they are who they claim to be. Phishing attacks use email or malicious websites to solicit personal information by posing as a trustworthy organization. Before submitting your email address or other personal information online, you need to be sure that the privacy of that information will be protected.
Creating a Culture of Good
A Q&A With Ryan McCarty

As co-founder of Culture of Good, Inc., Ryan McCarty works to inspire businesses to create altruistic programs that make the world a better place. He met recently with NTCA members at the Telecom Executive Forum to share his message of engaging the hearts of employees and empowering them to make the changes they wish to see in their communities. We had the opportunity to talk with him following the event to learn more about Ryan and his message.

What is the Culture of Good?
The Culture of Good teaches for-profit companies how to operate their business with the soul of a non-profit. After leading non-profit work for over 20 years, I entered the business world only to find most employees don’t see a connection between their everyday work and a higher purpose. I also found that most companies don’t know how to properly engage their employees or care enough to even try. The Culture of Good inspires employees, ignites positive change in the world and impacts a company’s bottom line. Because of that, it’s a win-win for all stakeholders.

In your presentation, you posed the question, “Does My Why = My What?” Can you explain that idea in a nutshell?
All of us wake up every day knowing what we have to get done for the day—that’s our checklist of tasks. Few of us know why we are doing those things—that’s our higher purpose. Our “why” gives us a sense of fulfillment because we see our impact and know that it matters. Once our work has meaning, it profoundly impacts our level of productivity, engagement and overall well-being. Every person wants to know that he or she is making a positive difference, and the Culture of Good gives us that sense of purpose, even while at work.

Once a company discovers their specific cause, which aligns their core competency with the passions of their employees and customers, the leadership team can inspire all stakeholders to do good. This helps employees have a stronger connection to their peers and customers in authentic ways and drives the business to greater success while simultaneously doing good in the world.

But, if the primary mission of a company is to maximize profits, how does that balance with altruism?
Profit is not evil. We all go into business to make money, but that doesn’t mean we cannot also make a positive difference. If anything, profits can be a great catalyst for good and, in return, good can be a great catalyst for profits. A culture of doing good becomes a unique business differentiator. When a company is run by people who care, it builds a culture that engages the hearts of employees and unleashes results that ultimately further the strategic intent of the business.

What is the personal motivation for a leader to get started on this type of effort?
I like to say that “the life I lead is the legacy I leave.” Our legacy is what we’re building every day in every way. Leaders need to ask themselves, “What do I want to be known for?” We realize at some point—and there is always a moment we come to this realization—that life is more than the stuff we accumulate, the size of the business we build or the balance of our 401(k). Life
is worth more than net worth. In the end, our greatest accomplishments will be what we have done for others. True leadership isn’t just being in a position of authority; instead, it is embracing a purpose of guiding others to a place where they can fully realize that they matter and their life has meaning.

As a self-proclaimed “tattoo-covered, cigar-smokin’, beer-drinkin’ pastor” will you share a story about one of your tattoos?
Embarrassingly, yes! It has everything to do with being a pastor and a lot about me. I sat on stage and preached a sermon about how we are tattooed on the heart of God all while being tatted in front of the audience. That’s the cool part—although some folks decided that day to never come back to my church! Now to the embarrassing part about the content of that tattoo. On my right forearm is the McCarty family motto from Ireland: “To the brave and faithful man nothing is difficult.” Pretty cool huh? Until I got my DNA results back from Ancestry.com and discovered I am only 2% Irish! Meanwhile, my wife, who happens to be biracial, got a good laugh out of the fact that her DNA results showed she is more than 20% Irish. So, the lesson here is to make sure you know your full heritage before you get it permanently tattooed on your skin.●

THE PEOPLE.
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THE SOLUTIONS.
THE BSS/OSS TEAM TO TAKE YOUR BUSINESS TO THE NEXT LEVEL.

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We've all heard it, repeatedly, for what seems like at least a decade: "Do more with less." This corporate mantra is pervasive in almost every industry—less resources, less spending, less everything, but without sacrificing the "more." As deflating as that may sound, there is an underlying message that holds true: we all can be more efficient. But how?

Eliminating waste is relatively easy. Just launch a relentless search for work that is not contributing to your organization's 3- or 5-year goals. Take a look at old processes that haven't been touched in years. There's savings hiding in a few corners around the office, for sure. But improving efficiency in how you do business requires a strategic vision and sorting of priorities. To bring about strategic change in the business world, you must engage at least one of the following levers: people, process or technology.

GVTC Communications, based in New Braunfels, Texas, made a strategic decision to invest in technology to address the needs of their 5-year plan. They recognized early that running a more efficient operations program would reduce costs while increasing customer satisfaction, ultimately leading to increased revenue. With top-notch leadership and extremely focused teams, they realized those goals and more to generate an undeniable ROI on their investment. GVTC now looks like a rock star in the industry. Let's examine their approach and success story.

A Calculated Vetting Process
GVTC Communications is a leader in the rural telecommunications field with a service area that spans 2,000 square miles of South Central Texas. They have over 42,000 customers and face the usual challenges that come from managing a workforce to support customer needs. They came to the conclusion that an investment in Visual Operations Software would be the best strategic lever to achieve results.

The extensive vendor vetting process included RFP responses and interviews that would yield the optimum company with an uncommon level of partnership and proven industry expertise. After the thorough investigation of 19 vendors, GVTC chose Mapcom Systems' M4 Solutions.

Visualizing, Then Realizing Efficiency
Prior to implementing M4 Solutions, GVTC management knew the key to success would be an open platform that fully, and willingly, integrates with other systems to achieve full transparency between the business units. Mapcom Systems experts worked alongside the GVTC team to configure a seamlessly integrated solution that improved efficiency and reporting. Now with M4 Workforce, both management and executives have gained new visibility into the entire service fulfillment and assurance processes. Don Salter, applications system analyst at GVTC, states, “Everyone is perfectly and fully informed of what we’ve done with the customer and what needs to be done.”

Reducing MTTI & MTTR to Increase Satisfaction—and Profits!
The industry key performance indicators for any telecom operations team is Mean-Time-To-Install (MTTI) and Mean-Time-To-Repair (MTTR). Achieve improvements to these two metrics and you will see instant increases in customer satisfaction, as well as revenue. M4 Workforce combined sophisticated optimization techniques and clarity of work schedules to help GVTC achieve industry leading statistics in these key areas. "We've seen
a 25–30% productivity rise on service orders and trouble tickets. We’re working more tickets every day than we ever have before with M4 Solutions,” says Daryl Fuhrmann, I&R Supervisor.

MTTI has dropped drastically after the move to M4: from 4.3 days down to 2.19 days. GVTC now has the technology capability to book customers to “same-day” appointments, which has helped close new opportunities and drive revenue.

As troubles occur in the network, GVTC is now viewed as a much more nimble provider, able to respond and act better than ever before. Since moving to M4 Solutions, MTTR has reduced from 6.59 hours to 3.96 hours. “We went from scheduling only 45% of trouble tickets to scheduling 98%” reports Nicole Reininger, service center manager. The drag-and-drop interface has also made it easier to assign tickets in “Storm Mode” when a large influx of trouble tickets occurs. The majority of the time, under the new platform, they are able to see and resolve customers the very same day and reduce many of the complaint calls that detracted from making progress.

**Special Projects Focus and Execution**

In addition to running daily operations related to installs, GVTC had to address the ever-changing technology innovations that would allow them to continue the superior service their customers have come to expect. One project required the upgrade of 7,415 ONTs throughout their territory, which was estimated to take 4–6 months. The challenge: Fitting an unanticipated project of this scale into normal business hours without impacting day-to-day operations and fatigueing their current employees.

The situation called for a flexible platform that was easy to use, easy to set up and intuitive enough to facilitate fast training. Again, GVTC called upon Mapcom’s M4 Workforce & MobileTech solutions to accomplish their goals. GVTC outsourced the field work to 15 contractors, who were trained in four hours and completed their first ONT swaps that same day! “The automation M4 Mobile Tech allowed us to have contractors in the field changing out ONTs without creating additional phone calls into our support desk. Due to M4, we were able to complete the project in 10 weeks without adding extra headcount,” said Garrett Leising, service center supervisor. Using systematic solutions coupled with laser project focus, GVTC accomplished all project objectives in half the time.

And rather than manually create each ONT service order, M4 Workforce automated the ticket generation and dispatch schedule, saving over 600 man-hours. “The efficiency in training and facilitating the work saved GVTC $200K in labor costs,” said Nicole Reininger, service center manager.

**What’s Next for GVTC**

The sky is the limit. “We’ve achieved an uncommon level of partnership with Mapcom Systems, which has enabled us to exceed expectations in all areas of operational efficiency and customer satisfaction,” said Mark Gitter, CFO. “Our business critical KPIs have improved after just 4 months to all-time highs, and the ROI continues to impress the management team, all while enhancing customer experience in today’s competitive environment.” The KPIs continue to improve each quarter as the operations teams leverage M4 Solutions to its fullest capacity. Quality software alone does not guarantee impressive results; it takes a skilled and focused team backed by exceptional leadership.
Our industry leaders are the driving force behind advancing technology. As a rural broadband provider, your business is the foundation to help other businesses grow and your community to thrive.

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**DIY Community Economic Development**

**Shining Stars Show How Wellness Works in Their Communities**

**The Video Conundrum: To Offer or Not to Offer?**

To submit article ideas, send proposals to the editor at publications@ntca.org.
Satellite TV services saw much higher subscriber losses in 2017 than they did in 2016—and than cable companies saw during the same time period.

“The main reason satellite companies are in a bind is because they lack widespread broadband services to recoup the cost of people ditching pay-TV packages,” wrote Sara Fischer and Kim Hart.

On a brighter note, satellite operators have seen some success in converting pay-TV subscribers to digital streaming TV services like Sling TV and DirectTV, adding 1,599,000 “skinny bundle” subscribers last year.

Satellite Suffers Most in a Cord-Cutting Era

IN 2017 SATELLITE COMPANIES LOST

1,550,000

SUBSCRIBERS...

VS

40,000

IN 2016

The top cable companies lost about 660,000 video subscribers in 2017 compared with a loss of about 275,000 subscribers in 2016.

FYI...TV streaming subscribers Feb. 2018

source: axios.com | data: leichtmanresearch.com

Christian Hamaker is editor of Rural Telecom. Contact him at chamaker@ntca.org.
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