SMALL
But Fast
Outrunning Giants in the Gigabit Rural Race

By Brittany Diaz Judge

Communications Service Providers (CSPs) are on the edge of a new frontier: gigabit Internet. In an industry so charged by competition and innovation, it can be daunting to try to keep up with telecom giants. Google, Comcast, and Cox are just a few major players that have arrived on the gigabit scene, rolling out massive plans for implementation.

While these behemoths lumber away with their large-scale plans, who is looking at rural America? Rural CSPs are in the position to take gigabit Internet and run with it, reaching the finish line while telecom titans plod along. Many rural CSPs can and already are capitalizing on previously laid FTTH to upgrade their communities to gigabit service.

Before making the jump, CSPs need to conduct a thorough and accurate needs assessment for the intended service area. Start the process with consumer education: inform them of the basics of broadband, success stories from similar communities, current broadband possibilities, etc. It's vital to let stakeholders and customers know what their broadband service looks like now, and what it can look like after implementation.

A second, more critical step is to gather useful data from influential populations, such as business owners, students or community leaders. How do your customers view their current service? What do they use broadband for, and what can't they do yet? What would they like to be able to do with broadband in 3 to 5 years?

Take a cue from a telco that knows how to put community relationships to good use: Waitsfield and Champlain Valley Telecom (WCVT) partnered with local business leaders and capitalized on its infrastructure to provide downtown Wi-Fi to more than 100 businesses in west-central Vermont. This strategic collaboration earned WCVT the Smart Rural Community Collaboration Challenge award and grant from NTCA-The Rural Broadband Association (www.ntca.org) in March 2015.

Building partnerships and gauging impact that gigabit Internet service would have on the community allows you to best prepare for the coming gigabit rollout.

Operating at Giga-Speed

Once market research is complete, CSPs face the second obstacle: deployment.

For many providers, pieces of the infrastructure for a gigabit upgrade are already in place. The question then becomes one of operational readiness. Gigabit rollout might be a company's first major infrastructure upgrade since the move away from xDSL, and employees might not be prepared for the departmental coordination that a major upgrade necessitates.

Fortunately there are tools to assist in streamlining the process, maximizing employees as a resource, and reducing extraneous work. One way to simplify is to centralize information, rather than keeping departmental silos. According to our most recent impact studies, OSP and ISP engineers experience a combined average of 25% lost time, largely due to inaccurate, out-of-date, or incomplete, records. Customer Service, Marketing, and Sales departments lose about 21% of time, while Line Assigners lose a whopping 60%.

With industry giants stomping about major cities, the time for small telecoms to clear the deployment hurdle is *now*. The secret to winning the gigabit Internet race is anticipating obstacles and taking the leap.

Assessing Giga-Readiness

The first problem telecoms may encounter is the lack of useful information from their communities. Gigabit Internet has the potential to enormously impact the day-to-day lives of consumers, from top-level economics to the minutia of daily routines.

Data consolidation solves several problems at once:

• It saves employees from making phone calls to access information from other departments.

• It prevents the creation of multiple records that contradict each other.

• It facilitates faster customer service by providing on-the-spot answers.

Along with a multi-system integration, dynamic information sharing is vital to operational readiness. WCVT uses Mapcom Systems' M4 Solutions Suite to ease some of these common operational pains.

Selling the Giga-WOW

Once a CSP has made the decision to join the race, deployed equipment, and secured tools to operate gigabit broadband, the final hurdle is marketing the need to customers. Rural communities are accustomed to feeling left behind in terms of technology; the latest and greatest innovations aren't always available in isolated areas. Broadband titans seem to prioritize large cities, leaving a void to be filled in rural America.

Capitalizing on the gigabit race is a ripe opportunity for a CSP to position itself as *the* local leader in technology and broadband. Showcasing industry knowledge is the first step. Provide education to the consumer about the perks of increased bandwidth for the individual: faster streaming, improved connection for multiple devices, consistent connection for Internet-of-Things devices, and beyond.

The real ace in the hole, though, is the implication for the community as a whole.

• The elderly population can live more comfortably with new technologies like accessible telemedicine.

• Businesses can thrive through improved digital literacy.

• Job creation comes second only to the possibility of drawing new business altogether.

Another example of a smaller community that embraced gigabit Internet is Chattanooga, Tennessee. As a result, it attracted expansions by big names like Amazon and Volkswagen. Kansas City, Cleveland, and Lafayette all witnessed startups migrating to their communities, eager to take advantage of gigabit's potential.

With its untapped potential and technology-hungry population, rural CSPs are in the historically unique position to bring their service areas a new innovation before it reaches the rest of the US. With thorough research, dynamic communication, and strategic leadership, small CSPs can outpace communications giants and become the forerunner of rural America's technology race. ∎
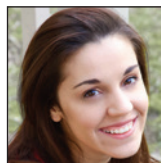
Brittany Diaz Judge is Content Manager at Mapcom Systems. She joined Mapcom in 2014. She tracks the latest trends in technology, and creates content for the telecommunications industry. For more of Brittany's writing, visit Mapcom's industry blog located at www.mapcom.com.