

BUSINESS

connections



How LifeStore Combines Technology With the Human Touch

Pictured L to R: IT Manager Josh Rountree, Chief Banking Officer Joedy Eller, and Chief Executive Officer Bob Washburn



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BUSINESS connections

Technology can't replace the human touch. No matter how powerful our technology is, businesses are still fueled by the energy of human skills and personal relationships.

In this March issue of *Business Connections*, we take a look at both categories of business resources. On page 3, we share some **common misconceptions about Internet speed** and remind you to regularly assess whether your current connection is keeping pace with your needs. This is followed on pages 4 and 5 with a **Business Spotlight on LifeStore Bank and Insurance**. LifeStore is an excellent example of a business that's mastering the combination of using technology while building strong community relationships one person at a time. We provide a **Metro Ethernet Network** to LifeStore and are proud to help them **increase productivity and decrease costs**.

You'll find some decidedly low-tech ideas for **enhancing the customer experience and expressing customer appreciation** on pages 6 and 7; hopefully they'll inspire you to maintain that human touch with your customers. It's amazing how appreciated simple personal gestures can be in a computerized world of "press one for this and two for that."

SkyLine/SkyBest remains deeply committed to serving our communities with excellence. You can count on our technology and our people to be there for you. Whenever you face communications challenges, we're just a phone call away.

Sincerely,

Jimmy C. Blevins
Chief Executive Officer

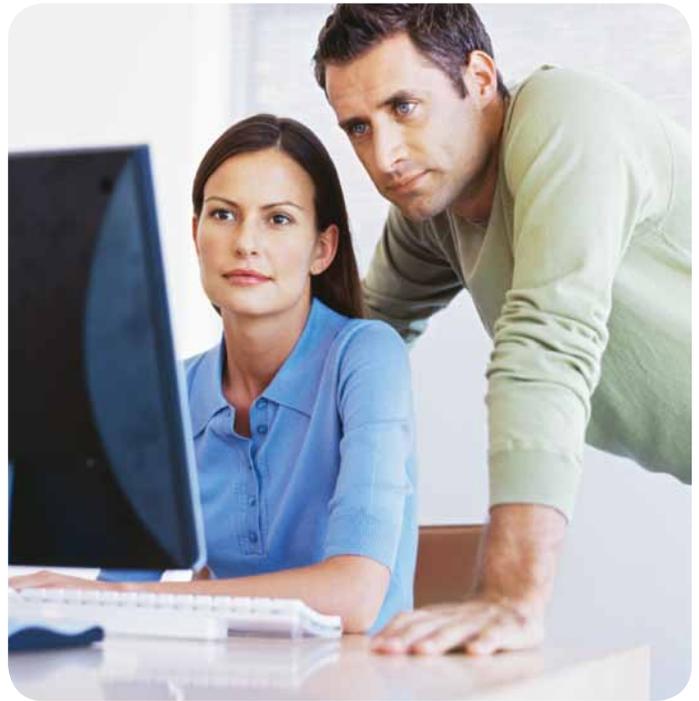


P.S. Speaking of keeping it local, LifeStore Bank & Insurance is one of the first area businesses to advertise using SkyBest TV's new advertising program. You'll see LifeStore ads on major networks, such as Fox News, HGTV, A&E and more. To promote your business on SkyBest TV, visit www.SkyBestTV.com/Advertise or call 1-800-759-2226.

Cover photo by Todd Bush, www.bushphoto.com

Common Misconceptions About Internet Speeds

Here's the reality—your business needs more speed for more productivity



There are some common misconceptions out there about Internet speeds, particularly among owners of small businesses. It's unfortunate, since inadequate Internet speeds can slow down workflow and prevent a business from keeping pace with customer demands. Here's your reality check:

Misconception: The Internet connection our business signed up for several years ago is fine. There's no reason to change things.

Reality: If you haven't given much thought to the speed of your Internet connection since it was installed in the last decade, you're doing your business a huge disservice. As your business grows and technology evolves, your Internet connection needs to change as well. After all, so much business activity is now done online, and data-intensive applications require faster data speeds. If you want to stay ahead of your competition, you need to be traveling as fast, or faster, than they are.

Misconception: Having a slow Internet connection doesn't affect my productivity.

Reality: Think how often you use the Internet each day and how much time you waste with a slow connection. In some cases, it could take several additional minutes to access key information from a vendor's catalog or upload large photo files. What's your time worth? And what's your employees' time worth?

Misconception: If I have faster Internet speeds, my employees will just spend more time "surfing" instead of getting work done.

Reality: Many studies have shown efficiencies in the workplace are far more likely when the right tools are being used. In today's business environment, it's essential to have adequate Internet speeds. If they're painfully slow, your staff is more likely to cut corners—not looking for additional vendor quotes, settling for less than complete research on competitors or electing not to check emails as often—which can cost your business money. Having the right tools for the job also has a direct impact on retaining quality employees.

Misconception: My customers are not affected by my lack of adequate Internet speeds.

Reality: Even if your customers never come in direct contact with your Internet connection, it can have an impact on their experience with you. For example, if they have to wait for you to pull up information while they're on the phone or in your office, it can give the impression that your business is not as efficient or as professional as others. Today, everyone expects instant results and a sense of urgency is the norm.

To find out more about the variety of high-speed Internet solutions offered by SkyLine/SkyBest, call 1-800-759-2226 and speak with a member of our Business Sales Team.



Photo by Todd Bush, www.bushphoto.com

LifeStore Bank and Insurance

Connected to SkyLine/SkyBest through community ties and communications tools

When founded in 1939 as Ashe Building and Loan Association, LifeStore had a simple mission: to help friends and neighbors build homes. This mission has since expanded greatly. LifeStore now offers a whole spectrum of banking, investment and insurance services across a six-county area and employs 112 people. LifeStore Bank is a community bank based in Ashe County with branches in Boone, Jefferson, Warrensville and West Jefferson. LifeStore Insurance is an independent insurance agency that serves these markets along with Elkin, Lenoir, North Wilkesboro and Sparta.

Dedicated to Helping Communities

Together, these LifeStore businesses help many area families and businesses achieve their financial goals. Bob Washburn, Chief Executive Officer, notes, "LifeStore Bank is responsible for nearly a third of the market share in deposits. We also continue to be a leader in home mortgages and small business loans. For the last fiscal year, we reported a 72 percent increase in income and have remained well capitalized during a time when so many banks have struggled." Washburn adds, "Our insurance operation continues to grow and be profitable. We're proud to represent many national companies and provide the most comprehensive array of insurance products in this region."

LifeStore believes that being a community-based business is more than just a matter of location. It's a matter of attitude and a matter of tradition. This philosophy is

shared by SkyLine/SkyBest and both companies got their start in Ashe County. "Like SkyLine/SkyBest, LifeStore is engrained in the fabric of the communities we serve. The combination of local operations and innovative product offerings are the cornerstone of our business," says Joedy Eller, Chief Banking Officer.



Chief Banking Officer Joedy Eller (left) and Chief Executive Officer Bob Washburn

Photo by Todd Bush, www.bushphoto.com

Since our conversion to Metro Ethernet, we have been able to connect to our locations more quickly, allowing our employees to work more efficiently."

— BOB WASHBURN, CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER, LIFESTORE BANK AND INSURANCE

Eller continues, "LifeStore believes in establishing long-term relationships with our customers. We're embedded in our local communities, creating local jobs, building the economy, supporting local organizations and being a part of the community. A recent example of our community involvement was our Feeding Families For Christmas project. This was a company-wide initiative where we collected food to feed families with children and delivered it to their homes for Christmas. Through donations from LifeStore, its customers, employees and caring community members, we were able to give 3,500 pounds of food items and over \$1,000 to families in Ashe, Alleghany, Caldwell, Surry, Watauga and Wilkes Counties."

Keeping It Local

Says Washburn, "We found it only fitting to do business with SkyLine/SkyBest, the local telecommunications provider. There's an advantage when you do business locally—the decisions are made by someone who knows you and the community. You don't have to rely on someone in an office building far away from here who may not understand your needs."

One of the SkyLine/SkyBest communications tools used by LifeStore is a Metro Ethernet Network. It connects all the branches in the High Country including the corporate office in West Jefferson and the Boone, Jefferson, Mt. Jefferson, Sparta and Warrensville branches.

Metro Ethernet for Speed and Savings

Josh Rountree, IT Manager, explains, "Previously, we were using point-to-point T1 circuits. Metro Ethernet has made a huge difference in speed and price. Our connection speed between sites is much faster and we're saving money compared to the T1 circuits. We're also benefiting from Metro Ethernet's expandability and meshed net-

works. If we need more bandwidth, it's fairly easy to increase and if one Metro Ethernet connection goes down, all of our other sites are still able to communicate with each other."

Washburn comments, "Since our conversion to Metro Ethernet, we have been able to connect to our locations more quickly, allowing our employees to work more efficiently. Metro Ethernet is also a more economical source for connectivity and broadband access."



Photo by Todd Bush, www.bushphoto.com

Previously, we were using point-to-point T1 circuits. Metro Ethernet has made a huge difference in speed and price."

— JOSH ROUNTREE, IT MANAGER, LIFESTORE

Brent Keith, Business Sales Executive for SkyLine/SkyBest, has worked with LifeStore for years. Keith comments, "Our Metro Ethernet Network provides LifeStore with symmetrical, point-to-point and Internet connectivity and enables them to implement new communications technologies. We continue to work closely with LifeStore to make sure they have the bandwidth they need as they grow."

Given LifeStore's successful history, everyone is banking on continued growth.

Multiple Advantages of Metro Ethernet

Today's businesses require robust connectivity—not only to the Internet, but also to their own resources. Metro Ethernet from SkyLine/SkyBest supports businesses which need to connect to multiple LANs (Local Area Network) over a wide-area connection, send high volumes of data between several locations or share high-bandwidth applications between sites. In short, our Metro Ethernet is:

- **Scalable** - Bandwidth can be increased or decreased on demand without changing equipment or adding circuits.
- **Expandable** - New locations can be added easily without service interruptions.
- **Efficient** - Employees at different locations work together as if they are in the same building and can collaborate more efficiently and effectively.
- **Reliable** - In the event of a fiber cut, our circular-shaped network detects the failure and automatically re-routes traffic in the other direction, preventing a disruption of data services and Internet access.

Your business can achieve more speed at a lowered cost with our Metro Ethernet. You can also experience increased productivity and better management of uncertainties. Call 1-800-759-2226 and speak with a member of our Business Sales Team for details.



Photo by Todd Bush, www.bushphoto.com

SkyLine/SkyBest Business Sales Executive Brent Keith (left) and LifeStore IT Manager Josh Rountree

Going **BEYOND** Customer Service

Build loyalty by providing a great customer experience



What is it about your company that makes customers want to do business with you, and even tell others about it? Is it your fantastic products? Great selection? Impressive expertise? It's probably all of these things to some degree. But, to an even greater extent, it's how they feel about doing business with you, or what is known as their customer experience.

Improve Customer Experience, Improve Business

A study by RightNow Technologies found, "Customer service is the most influential thing a company can do to increase customer advocacy." The study revealed that 55 percent of consumers recommend a company because of its customer service, compared to products at 49 percent and price at 42 percent. In addition, customers are willing to pay more for a great customer experience — up to 25 percent more!

Emotional Bonds are Hard to Break

Customer experience is a somewhat new concept in business. It can be defined as follows: "The sum of all experiences a customer has with a supplier ... awareness, discovery, attraction, interaction, purchase, use, cultivation and advocacy." With each of these stages in the relationship, there are many opportunities to provide an excellent customer experience.

The key to doing so is identifying what emotions customers want to feel when doing business with you, then creating situations that enable it to happen. Examples of positive customer emotions include joy, trust, contentment and the feeling of "being taken care of." The cumulative emotions customers experience as they do business with you result in an emotional bond that becomes hard to break over time.

Practices that can instantly improve your customers' experience include making them feel valued, listening carefully to their concerns and delivering more than expected.

Benefits of a Customer Focus

You may be concerned that improving customer experience will cost you more in staffing, marketing and training; however, such improvement can actually help your bottom line in these ways:

- **Customer Loyalty.** It costs less to retain current customers than to attract new ones.
- **Additional Income.** Happy customers are willing to pay more for your products or services.
- **Word of Mouth.** Customers who love doing business with you will tell others about you.

Remember, it's not only what your customers think about your company, but also what they feel about it, that matters. Customer experience is at the heart of it all.

How well is SkyLine/SkyBest doing at customer service? We would love to get input from you in order to make improvements. Please visit www.skybest.com/survey to participate in our brief survey. Thanks for your time.

Show Your Customers YOU CARE

Give them tangible expressions of appreciation

It's tempting to focus your attention on gaining new customers. But remember to also devote some time and resources to encouraging existing customers to stick around. Here are a few ideas to consider:

Offer your expertise

Be helpful to your customers by sharing your knowledge in regular newsletters, on your website or through social media.

Hold a customer appreciation event

Whether it's a party, a presale or an educational seminar, customers will feel valued when you invite them to a special gathering.

Create customer categories

Categorize customers who spend a certain dollar amount, visit a certain number of times or refer your business to others. Then give them category-specific rewards.

Give a true gift

Honor long-time customers with a free gift every year or so. Select items that convey thoughtfulness and personal attention (such as unique, locally made items or a gift card to your store) rather than items that seem more like marketing ploys (such as mass-produced pens with your logo).

Offer discounts

Reward customers who sign up for your email list with frequent discount codes that can be redeemed at your store or website.



Partner with other businesses

If you're a dry cleaner, partner with a tailor; if you're a bookstore, partner with a card store. Ask your partner business to give you coupons, discounts or freebies to include with your own.

Send a card

There are many opportunities to recognize customers by sending cards—including birthdays and holidays or following a major purchase.

Remember, customer loyalty is good for business; when you show customers you appreciate them, they're more likely to refer you to others.

Allegheny Community Television Goes Worldwide!

Allegheny Community Television, or ACTV, is now streaming On Demand content at www.actv.me. This means your favorite Allegheny County shows will be available for download to your own device at your convenience. ACTV has teamed with PegCentral and Imaging Specialists to present single episodes of participating programs.

ACTV will soon begin uploading its schedule to SkyBest TV's electronic programming guide so viewers can plan for upcoming broadcasts. Detailed information for individual episodes will be added including content, producers, show credits, run times and production dates.

This means your favorite Allegheny County shows will be available for download to your own device at your convenience.

Charlie Scott, Station Manager, notes, "The streaming ability we've gained with our latest equipment upgrade will allow our station to be accessed by anyone who isn't able to see us on our affiliate stations. That's right—ACTV content will be available to the entire planet! It's fun to imagine what the world will think of a Sparta Town Council Meeting or the Allegheny County Extension Office Cooking Show."





Metro Ethernet Connects Multiple Locations With Multiple Benefits

Metro Ethernet from SkyLine/SkyBest makes sharing information between computers across town as simple as sharing information between computers across the hall. Call the Business Sales Team to find out more.

