

Partnering to Build a Hi-Tech Telecommunications Network – And, of course, Washing Cars

The mission: Create a new telecommunications infrastructure while facilitating a wholesale move to the cloud for a retail outlet with 17 locations in three states. And it had to be timed to simultaneously bring the company's voice and data services online on a specific day as part of reorganization of a 67-year-old family business.

Written by Rick Bird
Photography by Greg Grupenhof

That was the job completed last fall for Mike's Carwash by Advanced Technology Consulting, Inc. (ATC), one of the region's leading telecommunications firms providing a strategic view of integrated voice, data, and cloud services for more than 250 clients and thousands of locations nationwide.

The new system was needed due to a reorganization of Mike's Carwash Inc., a firm founded in 1948 in Fort Wayne, IN, by Joe Dahm that had grown to more than 40 locations. In the Cincinnati area, it has become the brand associated with a car wash with Mike's always gracious team members wearing their trademark white shirts and ties.

It was decided for succession planning it would be best to reorganize the company between Joe Dahm's sons, Bill and Mike. Under the reorganization, Mike, based in Cincinnati, would retain the Mike's Carwash name with 17 locations – eight in Greater Cincinnati – and a newly





Pictured left to right: Nexigen's J.J. Schaffer, ATC's David Goodwin, Mike's Carwash's Jamie Pierce and Mike Dahm, and ATC's Nick Enger.

renovated support location in Loveland. Bill would keep the Indianapolis-based locations that would be renamed Crew Carwash, while retaining the original company colors.

Previously, the company's locations were tied to the headquarters and a communications network in

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– Jamie Pierce

Indianapolis, so the new Mike's Carwash literally had to cut the cord with that location and start as a new entity as if it were a start-up.

ATC recognized the exciting potential of starting from a clean slate and providing the company a state-of-the-

art telecommunications system.

"It's nice when you have the ability to start from scratch and design it the right way, instead of inheriting something you might have to piecemeal together that would not be as secure, or have the higher-end functionality," says Nick Enger, ATC senior telecom consultant.

That sounded good to Mike Dahm, who was following the company legacy established by his father to do things "the right way with the customer always first in mind."

"We wanted to bring in a first-class firm like ATC that would really take us to the next level with state-of-the-art equipment and services," Dahm says. "Even though it's more money, we'd rather do it right since we always invest for the long haul."

Enger worked with Jamie Pierce, the IT director for Mike's Carwash, who has 26 years experience in IT with three multinational corporations. He also understood the exciting opportunities and challenges the reorganization plan presented.

ATC Outlines Three Steps to a Comprehensive Telecom Strategy

By Nick Enger, ATC Senior Telecom Consultant

The challenge of telecommunications – like many technology-driven markets – is keeping up with innovation. Most IT departments have many fish to fry, and nowadays most are increasingly focused on their customers and the end-user experience. A focus on telecom comes and goes with the flow of internal IT priorities.

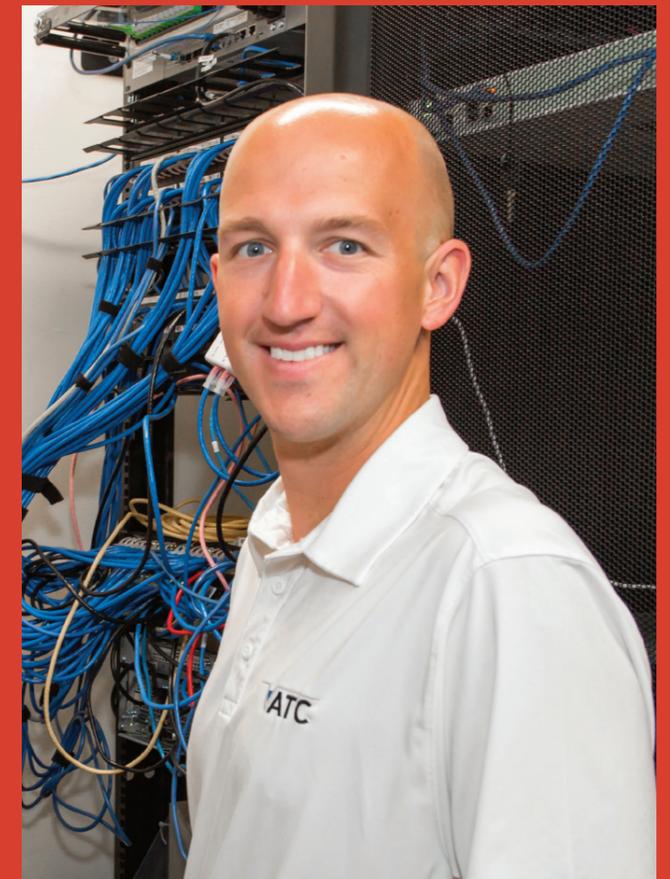
Often, as companies grow, change and evolve, telecom services are bolted on the existing structure. Services become disparate and outdated. The result: your infrastructure is not optimized and communications costs have escalated. So what should you do now?

Here is a three-step road map:

1. Get a firm understanding of your current services. If you have a multi-location network, be sure to inventory all sites for all services. Compare all services with your current invoices and contracts for discrepancies. If you have a relatively complex network, you will likely find services you're paying for, but don't receive. Get a bandwidth utilization report for each location and conduct a performance and capacity review. Identify any billing mistakes, overlapping services, and over- or under-used services.

2. Get a firm understanding of your contractual status with all carriers. You must understand all existing contracts inside and out. What are your commitments? Do termination fees apply if you switch services? What are the contract end dates for all things telecom, whether it be voice, data, mobility, or your VoIP phone system?

3. Develop a formal contract and telecom service strategy. Now that you understand your current state, what do you want your future state to look like, and what opportunities exist – within financial reason – to get you there? Can one provider do it all, or does mix-and-match serve you better? Within a multi-location network, some sites may have limited carrier options and sub-optimal pricing points. Sometimes mix-and-match can get you the best price and the most functionality. If one provider can give you what you want and you know you have the proper price point, is one invoice appealing, or is it easier to apply services to the proper cost center and therefore have multiple invoices?



Solution identification and procurement is the next step, but this is a good start to get you on your way to many benefits such as:

- Corrected billing errors
- Streamlined, optimized services and expenses
- Co-terminus contracts and simplified invoices
- Best rates for the necessary services
- A communications infrastructure built for growth
- Cost savings – use it to increase your bandwidth and build the disaster recovery (DR) plan you know you need.

Value creation within telecom can be elusive in the face of complex technologies and varied choices. Needless to say, it can be frustrating and time consuming. However, significant costs savings are very attainable, productivity gains are certain and a well-defined business continuity plan will keep you at peace.



"From a technology standpoint, we basically started from scratch," Pierce says. "One of our goals was not to make Mike's seem like a technology company. At the end of the day, Mike's still has to be able to wash cars and through it all that was the primary focus. We are customer focused and we didn't want to lose that. We didn't want technology to be front and center. If the IT is working as designed, you shouldn't even know there is technology involved in getting your car washed."

ATC recommended Mike's Carwash go with a hosted VoIP (voice over Internet protocol) phone system with MPLS (multi-protocol label switching) connectivity between all locations.

Mike's chose Cincinnati Bell Technology Solutions (CBTS) for the MPLS network and CBTS's Emerge hosted telephony solution.

In addition to the phone system, Mike's Carwash partnered with Nexigen, to deploy a cloud-based server platform for all locations in a centralized data center. Nexigen

provides ongoing IT services with an extended-hours help desk for Mike's Carwash. As part of the migration to the cloud, Nexigen also upgraded each location with premium-grade routers and switches. Each site received new locking cabinets and battery backup, providing remote access and power management from the Loveland support office. Centralized administration functionalities eliminate the need for any on-site management while increasing security.

The new system met specific retail needs for Mike's Carwash such as tracking its ticket "wash books" and unlimited customer bar code stickers, marketing tools that are key to the core business and often purchased online. The "wash books" had to be received like cash or credit cards yet kept in sync across all the locations to prevent replication of data.

Dahm wanted an efficient phone system, but one where the customer "did not get lost in voicemail jail." The mantra at Mike's is personalized service, so the CBTS Emerge system assures all phone calls can be answered

by a real person. It is able to create call center queues, so if a call comes to any location too busy with customers to answer, it automatically gets routed properly and answered by a human without going to voicemail. It solves the dilemma many retail outlets face where they want to concentrate on customers in-store, but realize an unanswered call might equal lost sales.

Best of all, the VoIP system – essentially laying a voice application over a connected data network – means there are virtually no hardware upkeep issues for Mike's Carwash.

"Their phone system is hosted by CBTS. Mike's Carwash doesn't have to buy that equipment or maintain it," Enger says. "It's affordable and very scalable. As Mike's continues to add locations, it gives them the ability to add pieces to the phone system."

Indeed, such systems are now part of the core business model for CBTS. Not long ago, such technology was reserved for the largest customers, but has now become affordable for small- and medium-size businesses.

"In the last couple of years, we're seeing those smaller or regional retailers, like Mike's, beginning to invest in these integrated solutions," says Greg Wheeler, vice president of sales-business markets with CBTS. "It was thought of as cutting-edge. Now, as the cost of high-speed fiber-optic connectivity has come down, and VoIP communications has come into the fold, it's very mainstream."

It is a similar story for Mike's when it comes to its cloud-based server platform, which was installed and maintained by Nexigen, the Newport-based IT services support provider.

"They have a centralized firewall managed by us in the cloud. All their locations feed through us so they didn't have to buy additional firewalls for each location," says Jon Salisbury, Nexigen co-founder. "We were also able to utilize a disaster and business continuity solution that was lower cost by using Mike's support location for back office storage. Often, you pay a large monthly fee for that, but we were able to let Mike's avoid that by letting them handle their own storage and business continuity."

Pierce says the two main goals for Mike's new telecommunications system was security and performance. "With Nexigen managing an internal network we are basically traveling out on the Internet with our data. But it's our own highway. It is a high-speed highway just for us."

And then there was bringing it all online. The move to the cloud, new VoIP, connectivity and an upgraded Local Area Network (LAN) for each location all had to go into operation simultaneously on a specific date as dictated by the reorganization plan. Also in the mix was bringing online the company's new Cincinnati support office and a second support office in Fort Wayne.

"It was a lot of moving parts," says Enger. "We took four months building everything to put in place on that one day."

"Mike's original company structure had terabytes of data. We were splitting that data in two and moving it into new systems," Salisbury says. "So, there was a lot of complexity there."

The task was accomplished with an all-nighter involving dozens of team members on October 4, 2014, strategically coordinated by ATC, Nexigen, CBTS and Mike's IT team.

"We had 12 hours to bring down one network and bring up a whole new one, complete with new phones, all the federal and state merchant IDs in place and 60 other things to worry about," says Pierce. "Working with ATC, Nexigen and CBTS, we were able to leverage their expertise and get it all done on the same night at the same time. We were washing cars by 7:58 the next morning."

In the end, Nexigen's Salisbury reflected that the feeling among all the partners involved was that it was a rewarding project.

"There was energy and passion in our meetings, with ATC showing an unwillingness to give up on small details," he says. "CBTS achieved metrics they had never done before. Nexigen used resources simultaneously we had never done before. There was some cleverness and innovation going on. We came up with some better ideas for security, delivered a secure changeover and some innovation in the cloud design."

Pierce is proud of the system. "I've been in this for 26 years with international companies and there were a lot of things we were able to do with the MPLS and Emerge platform that compares to some of those large corporations."

A year into the reorganization of Mike's Carwash, Dahm is forging ahead with expansion plans, opening new locations this fall in Western Hills and West Chester, while scouting other locations inside the I-275 loop.

With the help of partners like ATC, Mike's Carwash was honored with the 2015 Goering Center Family and Private Business All-Star Award.

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Mike's Carwash has 17 locations. You can reach them at 844.280.WASH (9274), or visit their website at www.mikescarwash.com

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