

# Giga-Gobbledygook

## OVERCOMING CUSTOMER CONFUSION ABOUT GIG SERVICES

BY ALISON GILLESPIE

**L**eif Handran has always been confident that his company, Nemont Telephone Cooperative (Scobey, Mont.), had a lot to offer customers. Like a coach with the home team advantage, the telco's sales and marketing manager knew his community's challenges and understood their needs in a way that a big national competitor from outside of the region could not. The small personal things that Nemont could offer—like coverage of the local high school sports teams each weekend, available to Nemont customers only—were highly valued by his neighbors in Montana and North Dakota. So when the chance came to also offer higher speeds through gigabit service, he knew that would serve his customers well, too.



The problem was, residents in his area didn't always understand what gigabit service was or what it could mean to their communications experience. Those who lived in newer subdivisions weren't sure why they would want to pay for it, and those in the remote locations weren't always familiar with telecom terminology.

"The younger crowd understands what a gig is, and what it is capable of, but our demographic here in Scobey is older," said Handran, referring to Nemont's customers. They include many families who have lived on the same farms and ranches for generations.

Handran isn't alone in facing this issue; many member companies of NTCA—The Rural Broadband Association are eager to become NTCA Certified Gig-Capable Providers and are excited about what the upgrade in speed can bring to their customer base. Gigabit speeds are lightning fast—1,000 Mbps, which is more than 100 times the average speed currently available in the United States. For rural providers, this means a chance to offer technology upgrades that aren't just as good as those in urban areas, but better.

Even so, jargon can turn customers off. Terms like "gigabit" and "symmetrical speeds" can confuse those who don't like computers. Customers who find technology intimidating may be especially resistant to paying a bit more for something they can't touch or feel.







Clockwise from the top: Nemont Telephone Cooperative discussed gig service with members at its annual meeting. Leif Handran awards Sarah Patridge for being its first gig business customer. Customers and noncustomers alike lined up in gig service.



recalled with a laugh. It was an easy way to educate the public in a friendly, fun setting.

Shannon Sears from West Carolina Rural Telephone Cooperative (Abbeville, S.C.) also thought a party atmosphere was the best way to tell the story of the telco's gigabit certification. His marketing and education campaign began with a party for his own staff, complete with a custom cake decorated with the same gigabit-certification medallion the company had been awarded by NTCA last October. There were gigabit-themed gift mugs for everyone, too. And later, back at their desks, the entire staff found that the medallion had been added to their email signatures and placed on the cover of each copy of the company's glossy magazine, sent out to customers six times a year.

Sears said his goal was to make it a story that every

### Show It Off

But Handran knew that if people could see what the speeds meant to their everyday lives, they'd be excited. When Nemont became a Certified Gig-Capable Provider last spring, Handran sent out a celebratory press release letting people know that Scobey was the first "gig community" in the state, with fiber to every single home and business and incredibly high speeds for those who wanted it.

Over the summer, he took to the streets with his company's proud new announcement by sponsoring a party literally in the middle of Main Street in Williston, N.D.—another town located in Nemont's service area. Banners lining the street included the company's logo, and were seen by residents who came out to listen to music and enjoy some tasty food on a warm night. Handran then used the band's break time to get on the mic and tell the captive audience what gigabit service could mean to them: a better service experience all the way around. He explained how it would mean faster uploading and downloading. He talked about things like easier online shopping—something that resonated in a place where there are no big box stores or malls, and where shoes and pants are ordered via a website or 800 number.

At the end of his brief explanation on stage, Handran then invited everyone at the party to stop by the company's store-on-wheels, which they had brought that night to Main Street complete with an Internet hook-up so that people could try it out for themselves.

"If people wanted to walk in and talk about our services we could direct them to the website and get people signed up, and that was a huge hit. It helped that the band was also very good and hit all the genres of music," Handran



Every staff member at West Carolina Rural Telephone Cooperative received a mug and a slice of cake to celebrate the company's Certified Gig-Capable Provider status last fall.





Paul Bunyan Communications provides fiber-to-the-home across 95% of its network, and is now rolling out gig service.

person could be excited to share. Everyone on staff was given a solid background explanation of what gigabit service was and what it could do for users. They were also provided palm cards they could give to anyone—slightly larger than business cards and filled with easy-to-read info about gig service.

“Our idea was that we’re all responsible for talking to the customers, whether we’re here or out in the community,” Sears said. It didn’t matter how technical or nontechnical the staff person was. What Sears wanted was for “everybody to be singing the same song.”

West Carolina’s demographic is an aging one. Some time back, the company began monthly “Techlink” classes at its offices to make sure that people of all ages and backgrounds felt like they were going to benefit from enhancements. Through the process of working with their customers in those classes, the staff gained a good sense for making things understandable and relevant to everyone, no matter what their station in life.

“When we were bragging about it and they’d go ‘Who cares? I’ve never heard of the gigabit-Internet before,’ we realized we needed to break it down to its simplest terms,” Sears said.

West Carolina also realized the value of high-profile testimonials when a developer promoting a new luxury retirement community in the region stepped forward as a champion of gigabit service.

“They used the services to upsell what they have here,” Sears said. One new home buyer in the community even moved in before hitting retirement age once he discovered that he could get better Internet service for his work-from-home remote office in South Carolina than he could at his former home in Chicago.

“They tell people if you want to retire you can come here and enjoy nature, but you don’t have to give up anything from a technology standpoint,” Sears said. Having that high visibility champion of gigabit service gave the local residents a sense of pride.

Up in north central Minnesota, Paul Bunyan Communications (Bemidji) proudly



announced it was aiming to offer gigabit service to almost all of its 5,000-square-miles geographic area. Brian Bissonette, marketing supervisor at Paul Bunyan, said the telco was ecstatic to get several high-profile online shouts of support from the state’s governor and one of the state’s senators, who talked and tweeted about it.

Paul Bunyan has always been quick to embrace tech upgrades, according to Bissonette. One of the first telcos to overbuild its CLEC area in the early 1990s, currently over 95% of its network is fiber-to-the-home in what is an incredibly diverse economic environment, incorporating one of the poorest counties in the state, towns with several industrial plants, young professionals, business hubs and a state university.

To get everyone to understand how the company was going to roll out gigabit service to the region, Bissonette’s team coined the term “the Gigazone.”

“It has a geographic component to it that is really helpful, because we couldn’t flip a switch and provide to everyone immediately,” Bissonette explained. “It’s going to have to be rolled out over time. So with that it actually is a regional area.”

To make the information relevant and understandable to all of the company’s customers, the telco wrote an article that anyone in the local press could use listing four advantages to gigabit service at home. It also sent letters to customers and did direct-mail campaigns.

By and large, most seemed to get why increased speeds would help improve things like their gaming and movie downloads, Bissonette said. However, families with multiple devices and gamers who wanted better speeds were excited but puzzled about how the company would eventually introduce the new service level to their neighborhood. The most important thing the company had to explain was whether customers lived in the Gigazone or outside of it.







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"It really became a catchphrase and a new word in the vernacular of northern Minnesota," Bissonette said. "Everywhere I go people are talking about it and referring to it. It's just a common name now here and is understood and related to us."

### Knowledge First

No matter which region of the country they are in, telcos should build a knowledge base early—maybe even before the gigabit speeds are available. In order to want the service, people need to understand what it is and why it could improve their everyday experiences.

In North Dakota, Handran and his team realized years ago that they would need to change their approach to upgrading all kinds of technology when few people seemed interested in having fiber added to their neighborhood utilities. "Before, our mentality was basically, 'Build fiber and they will come,' and that wasn't the best way to do it," he said. A lack of sign-ups caused the telco to recalibrate; now it sends surveys to residents in some of the Williston subdivisions it serves, providing information on fiber and a chance for customers to give feedback. People also are told they can go to a special website to ask for their neighborhood to get switched to fiber.

"We have a threshold number for each neighborhood that can justify the cost," Handran said. Neighbors explain the advantages to each other as they advocate for fiber. Nemont saves money by upgrading in places where it knows it will be guaranteed customers.

"When we started putting in fiber, nobody really understood what it was going to do for them, but now they do," explained Sears from West Carolina. "It's kind of like that with gig Internet service. Maybe they don't know exactly what it will do for them now, but they will before long, and then they'll go, 'Oh! That's why you guys stay on top of technology and that's why you keep us at the forefront of what's being provided today everywhere, even though we're in a rural area.'" ■

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