A Case Study of South Central Rural Telecommunications Cooperative

Founded in 1950 in Glasgow, Kentucky, South Central Rural Telecommunications Cooperative (SCRTC) offers broadband internet, telephone, and video service to nine counties in rural America. With a geographically diverse population, SCRTC currently boasts a subscriber base of roughly 24,000 members, and a 75 percent penetration rate for their fiber services.

For more than 70 years, SCRTC has focused on providing strong and reliable service, always looking for new ways to better serve their customers. In the ever-accelerating and competitive landscape of broadband internet, they were seeking a solution that would allow them to integrate their business systems to increase internal efficiencies, improve service, and enhance the entire experience for their members.

The challenge of making systems work together

Throughout its existence, SCRTC has demonstrated a spirit of resourcefulness and ingenuity in the management of its business and its determination to provide the best services available for its customers.

According to Melissa McCoy, the Regulatory and Information Systems Manager for SCRTC, "We've always kept our eyes focused on the future, trying to anticipate what was coming—to understand what our customers would need and the direction the industry was heading. It's been clear for some time that our customers required the ability to easily access their accounts online and manage their Wi-Fi, to be able to change their passwords, and to pay their bills."

However, the benefits of their pioneer spirit also came with limitations. "We've always been a homegrown system," says Network Manager Lonnie Meredith. "Using an IBM AS400 that was tied to vendor software, we wrote our own translation data that would allow the AS400 to provision services for us. In fact, everything here was written and coded in-house."

Due to an aging workforce, the internal knowledge and critical programming skillsets that SCRTC traditionally relied on were starting to retire and leave. Meredith continues, "We could foresee an impending situation in which all of that critical knowledge would end up residing in a single person, which is a recipe for disaster."

These concerns coincided with a growing desire to streamline processes to increase efficiency and make available new features for their customers—a challenge they hoped to meet without having to add additional work hours to an increasingly overburdened team. Specifically, they were looking for a way to integrate many of their key business components: accounting, sales and service, customer support, and provisioning to maximize efficiency, accuracy, and to foster better communications.

The search for a better solution

To address these issues, SCRTC engaged in extensive research into the existence of available software products, going so far as to reach out to other telecommunications co-ops and businesses, and conducting site visits. Throughout this investigation process, the single standard on which they stood firm was that whichever solution they ultimately selected would be the best solution for their customers and co-op members.

Following a deep evaluation of the various products and promises from a wide range of vendors, SCRTC turned to National Information Solutions Cooperative (NISC) to help bring their systems up-to-date with a select group of applications.

Leveraging the power of NISC SmartHub and iVUE AppSuite

NISC's web and mobile application, SmartHub, has been helping broadband and utility customers pay their bills and understand their usage for more than a decade. But the true power of SmartHub goes far beyond the bill.

Along with easy-to-understand bill and account management, customers can report service issues and outages through the app or via text message, manage their Wi-Fi networks to maximize speed, and receive important info and updates in their preferred communications channel, all from a single app.

The key applications that were of immediate interest to SCRTC were:

SmartHub WiFi is NISC's smart home Wi-Fi management system that enables customers to take control of their home network, view connected devices, restart their system, and even take advantage of parental controls—all from a convenient app.

iVUE AppSuite is designed to empower staff to access important data and critical information from a single, smart device—from accounting, customer care, and billing to operations and system administration, iVUE AppSuite keeps them connected to the information they need, whether they're working in a connected environment or not.

SmartHub Order Management provides customers with the option to manage existing services as well as add and upgrade packages 24/7. New customers can shop and compare traditional services, wireless plans and devices, as well as sign up and purchase on the spot.

Putting the solution to work

From the beginning, NISC provided clear, step-based instruction to help smooth the transition and facilitate training, bringing a comprehensive phased approach to the project—making sure SCRTC had performed their due diligence in creating clean data sets that had been tested and always careful to verify that each step was completed accurately before moving to the next. It was a meticulous process that helped to guarantee the best possible outcome.

SCRTC's employees played a key and supportive role in helping the process run smoothly by embracing the critical training that was required—spending time to become thoroughly familiar with the software and getting better equipped with the knowledge of how it worked to best serve and reduce the usual inconveniences that arise for customers during any major changes in core systems.

Prior to rollout, SCRTC was advised to prepare for large amounts of data to come out of the new processes. Having managed all their data in-house previously, Meredith felt that they were well-prepared to handle the new information that would be coming their way. "They blew the doors down on us," he says, laughing. "They gave us so much more data and information than we could ever have anticipated—we were almost overwhelmed! We had never realized so much data existed—and now we can't imagine functioning without it."

Getting results

During the first month of the implementation rollout, more than 10 percent of SCRTC's customer base had already logged in and started using SmartHub to manage their Wi-Fi. It's important to note that this occurred before SCRTC had made any concerted effort to educate their customers about the product—customers were learning about this service simply by word of mouth and when talking with SCRTC representatives. From SCRTC's perspective, this was phenomenal.

And that was only the beginning. "Prior to working with NISC, it was an enormous effort to get our systems to communicate with one another using manual entry," says McCoy. "It would have taken an extraordinary amount of additional hours, plus the purchasing of additional software, to offer our customers the kind of service they can now get with SmartHub Order Management —or the ability to go online and update their services or make orders—or for us to find the effective means to reach out to them. While we had been handling some basic online payments, we weren't able to accomplish anywhere near the efficiency that is made possible by SmartHub."

Another pain point that was alleviated was provisioning: In their old system, when a task arose, a message would need to be relayed via dispatcher to a technician's voicemail box for action to be taken. The technician would then need to remember to call in to check messages, which could direct him to the next steps…or he might have to call the dispatcher back for clarification. AppSuite has eliminated that inefficient process. Now, a technician simply receives a message on his phone and he's off and running.

"We have technicians go out to their homes and use AppSuite to provision a customer's service fully from the app on their phone, which has had the added effect of reducing calls into our office asking our employees to dig up equipment," says McCoy.

Meredith confirms, "This software gives our technicians the ability to do their work no matter where they are. They can solve a problem, or create a service ticket directly from their phone, even if they're simply standing in line at a grocery store where they've encountered a random customer. Whether ordering new equipment or resetting existing equipment—it's that easy. And it makes us look good!"

If there's a downside, it's only that the influx and availability of so much new data has required the SCRTC team to discover and train for new ways to locate, manage, and handle it to create even more new efficiencies.

Adding it up

In the end, the results speak for themselves. According to McCoy, "Overall integration has been a big win for us. Each department is now able to communicate and work together much more efficiently with enhanced abilities to collaborate. It allows us to better serve our customers and provide them the best service we can, and that will allow us to remain competitive in this industry that's in a constant state of change." Meredith agrees, "AppSuite and that side of things constitutes empowerment to the first level people that customers see every day."

NISC has been providing technology solutions to the utility and broadband industries for more than 50 years. NISC is committed to research, development, and quality of the latest in technology to ensure its solutions cannot only solve today's challenges but are positioned to solve tomorrow's as well.

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