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Columbus company dials up new phone system to serve customers

Business First of Columbus - by [Scott Rawdon](#) For Business First

Aimee Sumrall almost had a really bad day. The general manager of a **Safelite AutoGlass** customer service facility in Tampa, Florida, learned all her phones were down after nearby construction workers inadvertently cut the lines.

"We were without phone service for nearly seven hours," she said. But, her customers never knew it. With a quick cell phone call to the Columbus Safelite headquarters and the "flip of a switch," all the calls destined for the Tampa office were routed instantly through a new and complex phone system at headquarters.

"It was pretty seamless," said Sumrall.

Safelite AutoGlass deployed a multipack level service, or MPLS application, to save nearly \$6 million on the company phone bill the first year and yield significant marketing advantages in customer service.

Improving customer service

"We realize it's frustrating to be put on hold," said Brian O'Mara, Safelite's vice president of contact center operations. Through the MPLS system, Safelite essentially becomes its own phone company and controls its ability to switch call loads between centers in case of a storm or power outage, he said.

The system allows voice and data to travel to a centralized hub in Columbus, where it is distributed to any of 83 markets. The Columbus call center manages about 13 million calls annually including the calls for 17 U.S. property and casualty insurance companies. Safelite is a third-party administrator for more than 100 insurance carriers and fleet management firms. Safelite processes 5 million transactions annually through the call center, O'Mara said.

The cost of implementing the new phone system, including hardware, software licensing and internal labor, was approximately \$2.1 million, O'Mara said. Fewer than 10 associates from Safelite's telecommunications area generally support the phone system. No additional staff was needed to implement it.

The system, said O'Mara, gives Safelite the flexibility to staff the call center with only as many people as it needs. The staff is increased during peak call times and reduced when calls are fewer.

Explaining how the complex technology works in layman's terms is no easy task, even for Paul Schopis, director of networking for the Ohio Supercomputer Center. Schopis says he often explains to those familiar with technical terms how the Ohio Supercomputer Center uses MPLS to implement an entire virtual network.

"How it works is in primarily two scenarios," he said.

In the first instance, the center has regular Internet Protocol service, which is standard network service. Several schools are eligible to use the center's research networks, such as Internet2.

Internet2 is a non-profit consortium that develops and deploys advanced network applications and technologies for education and high-speed data transfer purposes.

Two over one

"We run a separate routing instance in a logical router," said Schopis.

He said that within one physical router are implemented two distinct routers logically.

"So, we are literally running two networks over one physical infrastructure," said Schopis, and the MPLS is used to build the routing infrastructure.

The Supercomputer Center also provides information transport services to the Ohio Office of Information Technology using MPLS to run its traffic between their routers and switches.

"It allows us to leverage our physical resources," he said.

Technical jargon aside, Sumrall said MPLS solves the catch-22 of her business - customers rely on Safelite's service most during emergency situations like hurricanes, when harsh conditions cause damage to glass.

This is when phone service is most likely to be interrupted. If a storm is forecast, Sumrall can transfer the Tampa telephony to Columbus as a precaution.

During the seven-hour phone service interruption, a bored insurance agent who works near the Safelite office paid Sumrall a visit. The agent was amazed to see the Safelite office operating normally, she said.

"His business was completely shut down," she said. "He couldn't believe that our printers continued to print."



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Brian O'Mara, a vice president with Safelite Solutions, oversaw installation of Safelite's phone system.

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