

BUSINESS CONNECTIONS

DECEMBER 2009 • VOLUME 1 • ISSUE 4

Celebrate the gifts
of the season



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Audrey Brooks, manager of 'Tis the Season

BUSINESS CONNECTIONS

Business Connections is a quarterly publication of SkyLine/SkyBest created for our business customers. As a local, member-owned cooperative, SkyLine Membership Corporation was established in 1951 to bring telephone service to rural residents of Alleghany, Ashe and Watauga counties. Today, SkyLine is the second-largest of eight telephone cooperatives in North Carolina. In 1998, SkyLine established SkyBest Communications, Inc. as a wholly-owned subsidiary to assume operations of SkyLine's deregulated businesses. Today, SkyLine/SkyBest provides a wide variety of telecommunications services—from basic dial tone services to advanced business systems and networking solutions.

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Community ties join neighbors together, build relationships, and foster social and economic growth. As a business owner or manager, part of your role is to be a strong community citizen. At SkyLine/SkyBest, we share this goal and remain committed to providing communications services that add value to the lives of our customers and the communities we serve.

This December issue of *Business Connections* begins on page 3 with an article about gift giving in the business world. When you choose to give locally purchased items to your customers during the holiday season, it's one way to support area businesses. On pages 4 and 5, we discuss the benefits of corporate volunteerism and share two examples of how SkyLine/SkyBest lends a hand to our neighbors in need.

A sense of community thrives wherever people gather together, and online connections are now part of this process. You'll find an article about hotspots on page 6 that features the West Jefferson Coffee House, a place where coffee blends perfectly with Wi-Fi High-Speed Internet access from SkyBest.

All of us at SkyLine/SkyBest wish you a joyous holiday season. It's a privilege to be part of the High Country business community, and we look forward to working with you in 2010.

Sincerely,

Kim Shepherd
Customer Service Manager



The Business of Gift Giving

What to give your customers to express appreciation

Your customers keep your company in business, and it's important to thank them for choosing you over the competition. No matter what time of year, customers always appreciate a personal acknowledgment of how important they are to you. You may choose to send gifts during the holiday season, or to recognize a special event such as the promotion of a customer to a new position. Since it can be challenging to select the right gift, here are some items that tend to be universally well received:

Food

Everyone loves a tasty treat, and this is a sure-fire way to put a smile on your customers' faces. From cookies and candy to cheese and fruit, you can't go wrong with food—especially when sending a single gift to a large group.

Flowers

Floral arrangements brighten any workspace. Choose cut flowers for the most impact, or potted plants for longevity. Either way, your customer will have a beautiful reminder of you and your company.

Regional Specialties

If you serve customers all over the country, you might want to send them a little something special from your region or state. You could pick up T-shirts or other souvenirs from a nearby tourist destination, or send locally made foods that give them a taste of your area.

Gift Cards

Let your customers select exactly what they want, whether it's from a coffee chain or a popular department store. Just be sure to choose gift cards from a business with locations that are close to where your customer lives.



As you select business gifts, keep these guidelines in mind:

- **Separate marketing from gift giving.** The primary point of giving these gifts is to thank customers for their business, not to market your business. If you give company-branded items, make sure they're something the customer would truly like and use, and keep the logo understated.
- **Watch the amount you spend.** The Internal Revenue Service allows you to deduct no more than \$25 per person for the cost of business gifts during your tax year.

On a related topic, when you're on the receiving end of a business gift, remember that you're not required to reciprocate with a gift of your own. Just be sure to send a note of thanks.

'Tis the Season

On the cover, we feature a photo of the year-round Christmas store called 'Tis the Season. This West Jefferson retailer, located at 14 South Jefferson Avenue, is always in the holiday spirit with a huge selection of gifts and decorative items including home fragrances, dinnerware, wine bags, ornaments, candles, tree skirts, table runners and stockings. Keep 'Tis the Season and our many other great locally-based retailers in mind when shopping for business gifts this year.



Corporate Volunteerism Pays Off

Lend a hand to help your community and your business

Recent studies have shown that individuals enjoy improved physical and mental health when they volunteer time for a good cause, most likely as a result of a sense of purpose and accomplishment. But can corporate volunteerism have a positive impact on the health of your business as well?

According to volunteermatch.org, a Web site that helps match volunteers with needs in their communities, companies of all sizes may enjoy several key advantages from corporate volunteerism. First, there's improved morale and team building. When company teams work together on a volunteer project outside the office, they forge stronger relationships with each other and feel good about doing something meaningful. Secondly, volunteerism promotes ongoing learning, since employees pick up new skills while volunteering that they might not have learned in their normal work environment. Finally, it can lead to a broader customer base. Studies have shown that the majority of young Americans aged 13 to 25 trust a company more if it is socially and/or environmentally responsible. Likewise, they will pay more attention to a company's message if they find that the company is committed to a cause.

Are you interested in developing (or expanding) a volunteer program for your business? The process typically involves the following steps:



SkyLine employees prepare to deliver Christmas presents they purchased for local senior citizens to New River Senior Programs, the organizer of Project Star. Pictured from left to right are: Paul Winterton, Jamie Richardson, Greg Poe, Josh Crumpton and Kirk Houck.

Assess employee interests, business objectives, and community needs.

Look for opportunities that align with your goals—whether they include increasing employee morale and retention or enhancing your reputation in the local marketplace. A good place to start is with these community service resources:

Alleghany County

Alleghany County Chamber of Commerce
336-372-5473

Ashe County

Contact: Glenda Luther,
Community Resource Coordinator
336-246-2461

Johnson County

Contact: Joyce Kidd, Senior
Center Director
423-727-8883

Shady Valley Meal Site

423-739-5977

Volunteer Avery County

Contact: Jayne McNeil, Director
828-737-0718

Watauga County

Contact: Diane Williams,
Community Services Specialist
828-265-8090

Western Watauga Community Center

Contact: Toni Wait, Director
828-297-5195

Pick a project.

Most likely, you'll find it best to focus on a project that will take advantage of the very services and products you provide for your customers. For instance, landscapers may choose to create a garden area at a local school. Or construction teams could offer time and supplies to renovate a local shelter.

Set a schedule.

How much time you commit is up to you. You may want to offer each employee one or two hours a week to work on the project, or allocate one full week a year on a large group commitment. Choose a schedule that is practical for you and helps you achieve your goals.

Track your progress.

Just like a sales goal, it's important to make sure that your volunteer efforts are paying off. Your own success could be measured by anything from improved employee attitudes to increased publicity for your team and those you're helping. Remember to let others know about ways you're making a difference, too. You could find yourself with a growing pool of potential workers, not to mention a happier, healthier workplace.

SkyLine/SkyBest Lends a Hand for the Holidays

SkyLine/SkyBest is committed to supporting worthy causes in the communities we serve and so are our employees. Through volunteer hours and donations, we do our best throughout the year to make a difference to our neighbors in need. It is especially meaningful for us to support area residents during the holiday season, and in this issue of *Business Connections*, we highlight two of these projects:

Ashe County Interagency Children's Christmas Project

SkyLine/SkyBest employees help to make Christmas brighter for children through the Ashe County Interagency Children's Christmas Project. Organized by area churches, the project draws interest from many individuals, organizations and businesses, and touches the lives of hundreds of children, from birth to age 18, each year. The list of eligible needy children in Ashe County is growing due to tough economic times, and SkyLine/SkyBest employees are stepping up to the plate with increased generosity.

Children's Christmas Project cards are posted in the offices for employees to choose. These cards detail the child's age, sizes and wish list for toys or other items. The goal is to provide holiday gifts to children who might not otherwise receive them because of family hardship. SkyLine/SkyBest employees purchase the gift items and later volunteer in helping wrap the packages at Family Central for distribution to area families.

Project Star

Project Star is a newer program created to reach out to senior citizens in Ashe County who are lonely and in need. The holidays can be a particularly stressful and depressing time for many people.



For several years, SkyLine employees have joined others in the community to make the Ashe County Interagency Children's Christmas Project a success. Shown here are West Jefferson employees with presents they purchased for this project. Area office employees also give generously in their communities during the holidays to help people in need.

Studies indicate that 15 to 25 percent of the elderly are depressed, and that number increases if there is chronic illness or the person is in a nursing home. In fact, the frequency of depression far exceeds that of Alzheimer's disease. Depression also may be worsened by poor diet, lack of exercise, financial difficulties, low levels of light and insufficient social support.

Many senior citizens in Ashe County are isolated and struggling with these challenges, so Project Star seeks to provide them with holiday gifts as well as personal contact. It is coordinated through New River Senior Programs and delivery is provided by several local agencies. SkyLine/SkyBest employees are among scores of Ashe County citizens who "adopt" individuals on the Project Star list and purchase practical holiday gifts for them.

Both Children's Christmas Project and Project Star are very popular activities with SkyLine/SkyBest employees, and

ones that make the season brighter not only for the gift recipients, but for us as well. They fill the holidays with heartwarming moments.

Our area office employees also reach out to families in need in Alleghany, Avery and Watauga counties by providing gifts, food and other means of support during the Christmas season.



From left, Laura Shepherd, Crystal Spencer and Teresa Penegar were among several SkyLine employees who volunteered to wrap presents at Family Central one evening.



Julie McGunegle, owner of West Jefferson Coffee Shop

Wi-Fi Perks Up Coffee House

Nothing goes better with a good cup of coffee than Wi-Fi high-speed Internet access from SkyBest. To Julie McGunegle, owner of the West Jefferson Coffee House, operating an Internet café requires a partner with a reliable connection and good customer service. She says, "I'm very happy with SkyBest's service. They're local and just a half mile away, so I can call them direct. And chances are, a technician will drop by rather than diagnose a problem over the phone. With a busy coffee shop, that's a big plus."

Are you warming up to the idea of becoming a hotspot? The first step is easy—just contact SkyBest. We can provide the Internet service, necessary equipment such as routers and access points, and professional installation. SkyBest technicians will also do testing after installation to make sure your new Wi-Fi network works well and meets your needs.

For more information about Wi-Fi high-speed Internet access from SkyBest, contact the Inside Sales Coordinator for your area:

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Hotspots are Heating Up

More and more businesses are adding Wi-Fi networks

Wi-Fi networks are now commonplace in airports, hotels, coffee shops and bookstores. In fact, these types of businesses virtually must offer wireless Internet access to their customers in order to be competitive. But they're not alone. More and more places are now becoming hotspots. Government facilities such as libraries, city/county office buildings, civic arenas and state parks are joining the list, as are medical offices, beauty salons, auto repair shops, truck stops, laundry mats, shopping centers and health clubs. In short, if it's a place where visitors gather for any length of time, it's probably a good candidate for Wi-Fi.

Many restaurants find that being a hotspot helps them gain loyal customers that appreciate the value and convenience of free Internet access, and sales increase as the duration of each visit goes up. A similar concept translates to other types of retail and service businesses. The more

comfortable customers (and their family members) are in an environment, the more likely they are to stick around and make additional purchases. Wi-Fi can also become a marketing tool through the log-on interface that provides branding and promotional opportunities for the business.

Of course, Wi-Fi applications go beyond those focused simply on customers. Businesses may be more interested in the flexibility and efficiency that Wi-Fi provides to employees who need Internet access while away from their desks in conference rooms or other areas of the building. In addition, they may want to offer clients and visitors the opportunity to use their laptops during meetings or while waiting for appointments.

It's not hard to see why Wi-Fi is so popular. If your company doesn't have a Wi-Fi network yet, ask yourself, "Why not?"



Don't Stop Now

Keep growing and advertising during the recession

Though this may seem counter-intuitive, a recession can be the time to increase your marketing activities. Why? Weaker players are forced from the market. Others cut back on advertising. This opens up market share and creates the opportunity for your business to more easily attract new customers.

What makes a recession a good time to expand your customer base is that savings-motivated customers are more receptive to changing their buying behavior. Your business has a better chance of capturing their attention and convincing them to switch to your company. The uneasy environment created by a recession also offers unique ways to reduce your costs, such as long-term leases and price breaks that would be unavailable in a healthier economy.

Whatever you do, don't roll over and play dead. Instead, learn to use this challenging period to your advantage.

Take Steps Toward Improvements

You may want to move ahead with those equipment upgrades or building renovations that you've had on the back burner, since companies are eager for your business today and prices are down. Do your homework and see what kinds of values are currently available.

Keep in mind that a bad economy has historically been good for the launch of new products and companies. We have the Great Depression to thank for inventions such as the Twinkie, Monopoly and the photocopier. According to Inc.com, some of the top businesses of today were created during periods of economic turmoil including Microsoft and Super 8.



Convey Strength Through Advertising

In addition to helping your business gain new customers, advertising during a recession can strengthen your relationship with existing customers. Data from Ad-ology Research shows that consumers often gauge a company's health by how often the company advertises. Nearly one-half of the Internet users surveyed said that if they noticed a drop-off in ads from a bank, they believed it was struggling, and 12 percent believed the financial institution might not be in business much longer. Conversely, when banks advertised frequently, consumers saw them as committed to business, being competitive or doing well. The same may well be true for other business categories.

During the recession that followed September 11, just 25 percent of all

companies boosted their ad spending. Those that did saw their market share rise more than twice as fast as it typically rises during a normal economy, according to a 2001 Cahners Advertising research report. Clearly, the overall message is to keep advertising.

Consumers often gauge a company's health by how often the company advertises.

Finally, remember that a recession is just a dip, and that the economy will eventually rebound. Remain focused on the position you'd like your company to have when it's over, and leverage the opportunities presented by the downturn to help you get there.



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 Group to find out more.

