

BUSINESS connections

Get a Taste of Why
Ashe County Cheese
is Successful



*Caption: (Note use of semi colons to group names and titles.)
Pictured L to R: Hollie Brown, SkyLine Inside Sales Coordinator; Brittany Elliott, Ashe County Cheese Store Assistant Manager; Craig Poe, SkyLine Field Services Technician; Josh Williams, Ashe County Cheese Manager; Tim Watson, SkyLine Field Services Supervisor; Laci Hardin, Ashe County Cheese Office Manager; and Robin Miller, SkyLine Inside Sales Coordinator.*



Management
Jimmy C. Blevins
Chief Executive Officer

Business Sales Department Contact Information
1-844-SKYBEST
businessolutions@skyline.org

Robin Miller
Inside Sales Coordinator
robin.miller@skyline.org

Hollie Brown
Inside Sales Coordinator
hollie.brown@skyline.org

Corporate Offices
1200 NC Hwy 194 N, West Jefferson,
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Postmaster Send Changes To
Myla Farmer
Marketing & Promotions Coordinator
SkyLine/SkyBest
PO Box 759
West Jefferson, NC 28694



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Planning ahead pays off. Whether it's scheduling an expansion to accommodate a growing business, warding off potential crises or determining how you might take advantage of new technology, planning ahead helps you prepare for both expected and unexpected challenges. This issue of *Business Connections* explores several situations in which planning ahead can benefit your business.

When you **Take a Break From the Interstate**, you can plan to support local businesses. The initiative to have locals and tourists use Highway 21 instead of the interstate includes an invitation to check out the U.S. 21 Road Market. This special event features local vendors and takes place July 29-31.

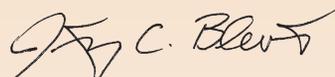
On pages 4 and 5, you can learn about our Business Spotlight customer, **Ashe County Cheese**, an 85-year old company that continues to look forward and expand with additions, improvements and new technology. SkyBest recently installed a new phone system for the company, which helps staff streamline their operations.

Next, on page 6, we explain how you could be **Planning for Common Threats**. Remember, not all disasters are big; yet, the small ones can still cause major hassles. For example, one wrong fiber bundle cut by another business owner could leave you without Internet and phone service.

The best technology strategies include thinking about how your business can take part in **The Fiber Revolution**. Fiber optic cables enable companies to innovate and expand in ways they never could before.

If any of your planning involves new technology, be sure to let us know. SkyLine/SkyBest is always happy to partner with you to find the best solutions for your needs.

Sincerely,


Jimmy C. Blevins
Chief Executive Officer



Cover photo by Todd Bush, www.bushphoto.com

Take a Break From the Interstate

U.S. Highway 21 offers beautiful scenery and unique attractions



When making your summer vacation plans this year, consider mapping a route that takes you along historic U.S. Highway 21. Why? When you take a break from Interstate highways, like nearby Interstate 77, you'll find relaxing roads less traveled offer the opportunity to admire gorgeous Appalachian countryside and experience unique attractions along the way.

U.S. 21 Road Market

One of those attractions is the annual U.S. 21 3-day Road Market, which takes place July 29-31 this year. This market is 100 miles—from Harmony, N.C. to Wytheville, Va.—of yard sales, sidewalk sales and special events. It attracts customers from all over the country and boosts economic activity in the local area. Now in its third year, the U.S. 21 Road Market was started by D. W. Miles, a local businessman who has supported economic development through tourism for many years. Miles notes that, in addition to the business gained by those who participate in the market itself, “The traffic helps restaurants, businesses, convenience stores and hotels along the route and will create new growth.”

Miles believes this event will continue to grow. He says, “I would really like to do one event per quarter—one for each of the four seasons. We want people to travel this route all year long, not just for three days in the summer. We have a lot to offer, including beautiful foliage and mountain scenery in the spring plus eight state and national parks along the corridor.”

Miles J.O.B. Fund

The “Take a Break from the Interstate” initiative started in 2012, which is a 501c3 charity. The council currently promotes regional travel, tourism and economic development on U.S. Highway 21. Member communities include Wythe County, Grayson County, Wilkes County, Town of Jonesville, Town of Wytheville, Alleghany County, Town of Elkin and Town of Harmony. The council includes member partners from communities along the highway. Funds to operate the initiative are provided by each locality listed above.

The purpose of the J.O.B. Fund, which is funded by Miles himself as well as donations from other contributors, is to create jobs and support entrepreneurs. Miles explains, “We loan money to people who want to start a business.” Miles notes that his motivation comes from his own experience: “I’ve lived in this community my whole life, and started my career from scratch. Others have supported me, so I know how important it is for others to receive help when they’re just starting. It’s rewarding to see our participants succeed.”

For more information about the Take a Break From the Interstate initiative, visit takeabreakfromtheinterstate.com or us21roadmarket.org.

Ashe County Cheese

This unique business provides hand-crafted products and a favorite tourist spot



Photo by Todd Bush, www.bushphoto.com

Pictured above: The Ashe County Cheese store in downtown West Jefferson attracts many tourists.

Page 5 top right photo: Brittany Elliott, Ashe County Cheese Store Assistant Manager, uses SkyBest Internet to monitor online orders.

Page 5 bottom left photo: Janet Phipps uses the ESI phone system to take orders at Ashe County Cheese.

Ashe County Cheese was started in 1930 by the Kraft Corporation, which helped consolidate several small cheese plants in the area. The company operated with a series of managers until 1975, when the manager at the time purchased it. The business was bought and sold by others over the years, and in the early 1980s a viewing room was added, which turned the plant into one of the most popular tourist attractions in North Carolina.

Changes for the Better

Current owners Mike Everhart and Tom Torkelson purchased the business in 1994, and 10 years later split it into two companies: Ashe County Cheese Company (the plant division) and Ashe County Cheese Store. The companies continue to work hand-in-hand. The store has been remodeled and expanded a number of times and now offers additional food and gift items made by merchants other than its sister company. The plant has also undergone several upgrades and currently produces a wide selection of cheese and butter varieties.

Manager Josh Williams notes that the upgrades on both sides were made with customers in mind: "We've tried to create a better environment for customers and will continue to do so any time we see things that could be improved." The plant side expects to expand production as demand increases. Williams explains, "Each year we see more requests,

especially from wholesale customers. In the next few months, we hope to start some major additions within the factory. Currently we make 40,000 pounds of cheese per week, and we're likely to see that increase."

SkyBest is very prompt whenever there is an issue, though that isn't often. We've been their customer for several years, and we've hardly had any problems."

— JOSH WILLIAMS, MANAGER,
ASHE COUNTY CHEESE

Tourists can visit the two locations any time of year and view the production at no charge. Williams credits the company's popularity to the ability for customers to purchase a locally made product at a

store across the street from where it's produced. He adds, "We're the oldest and largest cheese manufacturer in the Southeast. It's a unique business, and we provide high-quality, hand-crafted products."

Customers can also purchase products from Ashe County Cheese at the company's website, ashecountycheese.com. Williams says, "We've shipped to all 50 states, especially around Christmas when many companies use our products as corporate gifts."

Public and Community Outreach

Between the plant and the store, Ashe County Cheese employs 35 part-time and full-time workers. Williams notes that the store clerks enjoy dealing with the public. He says, "We have some locals that come by and pick up products that they buy regularly, but our main business is with tourists. Our employees in the store like being able to interact with travelers." In addition, both store and plant staff like the wide variety of products they offer.

The business extends its reach into the community through sponsoring various civic organizations, schools

and sports clubs. Williams says, "We do a lot of fundraising and donate ourselves, either financially or with products."

Clear Communication

To continue serving customers and the community as efficiently as possible, Ashe County Cheese uses services from SkyBest to reduce the time needed for regular tasks and dealing with technology issues. SkyLine/SkyBest Inside Sales Coordinator Robin Miller comments, "Ashe County Cheese is a long-standing business for West Jefferson, and we're proud to provide them with the latest technology including phone service, long-distance, broadband and a new ESI phone system. Fiber broadband service has given them higher broadband speeds and greater reliability. SkyBest also installed a network to connect the different areas of the business."

Williams notes, "The phone system connects our store and office phones. It allows us to communicate easily and save steps in sending orders back and forth between the plant, offices and shipping department, which enables us to keep up with customer requests." He adds, "Our point of sale system in the store is online, and the fiber connection



Photos by Todd Bush, www.bushphoto.com

has given us higher speeds for that, so we can ring people up and get them taken care of more quickly."

The service from SkyBest is also quick, notes Williams. "SkyBest is very prompt whenever there is an issue, though that isn't often. We've been their customer for several years, and we've hardly had any problems," he says. "But, when we do have a service need, they either come out and take care of it or help us resolve it over the phone. Also, when we upgraded to the ESI phone system, they did an excellent job with the installation."

Are You Getting the Most From Your Broadband?

Here at SkyBest, we like to make sure all our customers are operating with the fastest Internet speeds possible. Fiber optic service is available to 97 percent of SkyLine/SkyBest customers. Customers in areas that don't yet have it may still be able to get faster broadband speeds up to 12 Mbps. Boosting your speed could make a significant difference in terms of how well your Internet performs and how fast you can upload and download documents and other files.

To find out if you're eligible for a higher broadband speed, call 1-844-SKYBEST.





Planning for Common Threats

Be prepared for small events that can cause big problems

Disaster recovery plans typically focus on big threats like floods, fires and pandemics. But there are smaller and more common threats that also present challenges. Be sure to address issues like these in your planning:

Damage from Sprinkler Systems

Take a close look at your building's fire suppression systems. Even if you have a waterless system, are there sprinkler heads in the floors directly above it? Would your IT infrastructure be threatened in the event of a faulty sprinkler head or burst pipe? Investigate different types of fire suppression systems and protective shields, including what's allowed in your building. Also, consider a cloud backup system to preserve your data, such as SkyBest's new hosting solutions.

Outages

Outages can occur as the result of a variety of everyday events. Your business could be left without Internet and phone services because a property owner cut a fiber bundle while digging, a truck hit a utility pole or a storm caused damage. If you have backup generators, make sure you keep them maintained and stock up on enough fuel to get through an extended power outage.

Data Theft and Sabotage

Disgruntled employees can cause major problems if they steal or sabotage company data. They know exactly what is most valuable to your company and how to access it. To reduce your exposure, develop and maintain robust security measures. In addition, regularly survey employees to detect satisfaction levels and take steps to make needed changes.

Server Failure

Many causes—such as power loss, system crashes and hardware malfunctions—can lead to server failure. You could spend a lot of time and money on recovery efforts. Fortunately, there are steps you can take to avoid such a scenario: Consider moving your servers to a secure location offsite or moving to a cloud model in which you have no physical servers. Also, be sure to back up your data and have your equipment serviced regularly. SkyBest now offers managed, dedicated and cloud hosting at affordable rates that can protect your data.

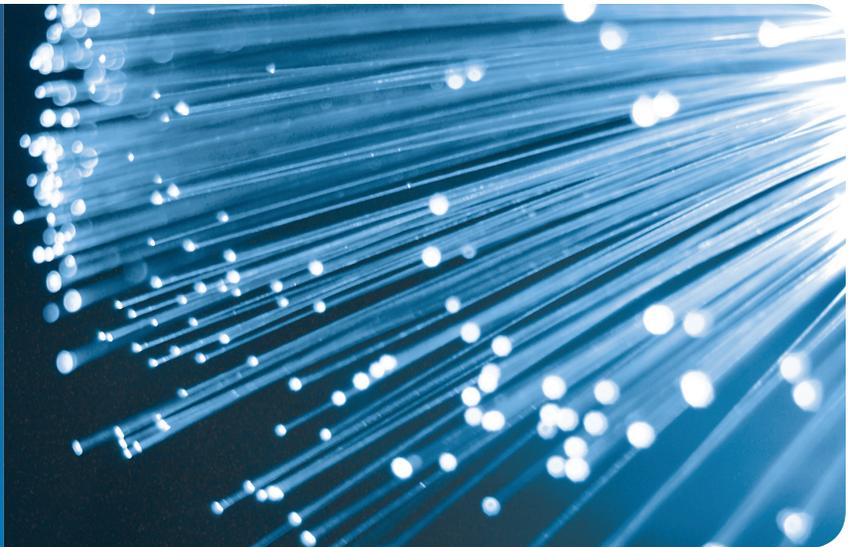
Construction That Blocks Entrances

Road construction and other types of infrastructure repairs can't be avoided, and businesses do sometimes have trouble staying afloat when entrances are blocked for an extended time. However, there are ways to survive and even thrive when this situation occurs: Stay informed about projects and connect with city officials to find out how your business is likely to be affected. See if you can find alternate entrances or locations to provide your services. Reach out to nearby businesses to see how they've dealt with similar situations in the past.

Taking these types of precautions now can help you avoid headaches later.

The Fiber Revolution

How tiny strands of light have become the backbone of the Internet



Fiber optics are thin strands that use light to carry Internet signals. They're lightweight and therefore easier to work with and transport. With these and many other benefits—not the least of which is significantly higher Internet speed—fiber has taken a leading role in the technology boom.

Big Benefits

Communication companies continue to replace copper networks with fiber because fiber enables much greater Internet upload and download speeds, offers greater security and is more cost efficient and easier to maintain. In addition, fiber is less prone than copper to outages due to temperature, moisture and other weather conditions.

The much faster speeds offered by fiber benefit both consumers and businesses. Consumers can run multiple devices with optimum performance, download music and other media quickly and have access to a high-quality connection for online games. Businesses can enable employees to work more quickly and also take advantage of cloud-based applications and tools.

Use of fiber optics benefits the economy as well. Companies may decide to do business in a location they couldn't have considered before, based on the availability of fiber Internet. They can also hire people in remote locations and build opportunities with global customers.

The Bandwidth Challenge

Currently, about 50 U.S. cities are equipped with Gigabit Internet, which means locals can get speeds of up to 1,000 Mbps. SkyLine/SkyBest is one of a small number of certified Gig-Capable providers in the country. Companies like Google Fiber and smaller regional communications companies—including SkyLine/SkyBest—are installing the fiber to enable this capability, with more to come soon.

All this bandwidth is needed because the amount of data transmitted via the Internet continues to increase. Cisco estimates that annual global IP traffic will pass the zettabyte (1,000 exabytes, which is equal to one billion gigabytes) threshold by the end of 2016, and will reach two zettabytes per year by 2019.¹

Much of the data being transmitted in the U.S. today is in video and audio format. In fact, video and audio streaming account for more than 70 percent of all broadband traffic during peak periods, according to networking firm Sandvine.² Video streaming is expected to increase even more in coming years.

Because of its reliability and cost efficiency, fiber will continue to power the Internet for many years to come. SkyLine/SkyBest wants to make sure all our customers have the highest speeds possible, and will continue to provide fiber and any future technologies required to make it happen.

¹Source: http://www.cisco.com/c/en/us/solutions/collateral/service-provider/visual-networking-index-vni/VNI_Hyperconnectivity_WP.html

²Source: <https://www.sandvine.com/trends/global-internet-phenomena/>

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