



Southern States Cooperative

Increasing Network Reliability and Response Time

Challenge

Owned by more than 300,000 farmers, Southern States Cooperative provides agricultural production supplies, farm and home products, and related services to its producer-owners and other customers. It accomplishes that task through a network of some 1,200 company-owned stores, local co-ops that it manages under contract, and private dealers in an area extending from Maine to Florida and as far west as Kentucky. As the company embarked on a strategic initiative to update and tailor its stores to meet the needs of a changing customer base, it also looked at revamping its communications set-up within those retail locations.

The retail stores previously had been using a satellite connection to access applications like the intranet, online catalog and ordering, time-keeping and financial applications. However, the connection was volatile, subject to weather interference and disruption, and Southern States found the response times unacceptable. The slow, unreliable connection decreased productivity because co-op employees spent far too much time on a daily basis waiting for simple screens on business-critical applications to load.

Solution

Southern States looked to IVANS to implement a high-speed solution that would increase its network's reliability and response time, and also enable the company to provide its stores with enhanced and additional capabilities via the connection. Together with AT&T, IVANS engineered and executed a broadband aggregation project that connected approximately 240 retail stores in under one year. As a result, Southern States saw a 25% increase in its usage activity across all of the the company's web applications. Additionally, IVANS broadband solution significantly improved delivery time so employees could now take full advantage of the programs.

With the IVANS broadband connection, Southern States was able to deliver such upgraded services as online queries and centralized customer information and sales data, along with a variety of other web applications to its retail outposts. "We have always wanted to provide these services but with the old satellite connection, our employees weren't willing to spend the time waiting to access them," said Karen Lankford, vice president, information systems at Southern States. "Moreover, we knew



Customer Need:

Linking multiple company-owned stores on a common, high-speed network.

IVANS Solution:

IVANS ability to easily migrate Southern States from their existing service and provide network coverage for their stores. IVANS implemented a secure broadband virtual private network (VPN) solution connecting each store back to the corporate headquarters.

Key Benefits:

- Increased network reliability and response time. Southern States saw a 25% increase in usage activity across all of the company's web applications.
- Increased productivity and delivery time due to timely and dependable execution of routine applications.
- Enhanced services now delivered, including online queries to centralized customer information and sales data along with other web applications to retail outposts.



that additional applications people were waiting for would not be utilized until the network was upgraded to support them.”

Southern States’ network utilizes the AT&T NetGate product, eliminating the complexity of virtual private network (VPN) client software for each site and ensuring each retail outlet can communicate with the central network via a secure, stable connection. In addition to improved functionality, the IVANS broadband solution met Southern States’ need to keep costs down and margins low. Overall, the affordable price point, combined with the built-in support IVANS offered in the event of an outage or other problems, made it the perfect choice.

Results

The success of the broadband aggregation project was enabled by IVANS support services throughout implementation. Well-choreographed deployment took place at each site without disrupting day-to-day operations. When working with a retail partner, it is essential that implementation be seamless and not impact normal business processes. To that end, IVANS adhered to a tightly-structured delivery schedule that was augmented with detailed reporting tools, thus allowing Southern States to keep track of progress and accurately prepare future sites for the roll-out. “IVANS really exceeded Southern

“IVANS really exceeded Southern States’ expectations...As a result of the improved connection, Southern States saw a 25% increase in usage.”

– **Karen Lankford**
vice president, information systems
Southern States

States’ expectations,” said Lankford.

The IVANS network solution will easily scale as Southern States grows, so the co-op can confidently expand with more retail outlets, knowing each site will be easily integrated and operate smoothly and efficiently on a fast, reliable network. This critical capability will enable Southern States to be more agile than its competitors and will be better able to respond to its customer needs.

About Southern States:

Founded to provide affordable, high-quality seed to Virginia farmers, Southern States Cooperative serves more than 300,000 members, mainly in the Midwest and South regions of the U.S.

The co-op offers its farmer-owners feed and fertilizer manufacturing, seed processing, grain marketing, and petroleum and propane services, as well as wholesale farm supplies. Its Southern States and Garden South stores sell farm supplies, garden products and fuel through some 1,200 retail outlets in 23 states. Other services include crop services, sales financing and an aquaculture program.



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