

Beyond Business as Usual: How Consolidated Communications Is Navigating the Pandemic and Preparing for the ‘New Normal’

Speed, continuity, flexibility and creativity enabled the company to meet the challenges staff and customers face as COVID-19 changed the ways people live and work overnight.

By Jennifer Spaude / *Consolidated Communications*

The COVID-19 outbreak continues to cause significant concern and impacts for consumers, businesses and communities across the globe, not the least of which has been an urgent shift to remote working environments. Combined with extended school closures, a strained medical infrastructure and significant movement and travel restrictions, this unprecedented situation has required flexible, nimble responses from critical infrastructure providers.

Thankfully, Consolidated Communications had a comprehensive business continuity plan, which allowed the company to adapt operations quickly and effectively and respond to the almost incomprehensible events of the present time. Like many organizations, we crafted emergency plans and hoped that the most extreme scenarios would never play out. Yet even with a road map in place, the COVID-19 outbreak creates new challenges. Some of the most important lessons we learned are evergreen but magnified under extraordinary circumstances.

SPEED IS CRITICAL

Obvious? Yes, but the importance cannot be overstated. We executed our plan very

quickly, enabling us to pivot operations, respond to customers and swiftly shift to a work-from-home environment over just a few days. Consolidated provides critical services, so our customer care, network and field teams must always be ready. Our health care, government and education customers look to us for continuity and stability of service and help evolving – sometimes overnight – to meet new demands in connecting their employees or constituents. Through close collaboration among our sales, operations and field teams, we implemented expedited processes to help customers add or upgrade circuits or new collaboration solutions to support their pandemic response plans. As an example and outcome of this process, we were able to help a Texas health department roll out its coronavirus contact center in 48 hours, just in time to meet a new state mandate. Overall, we enabled hundreds of mission-critical applications to support governmental agencies, health care facilities and other critical infrastructure.

CONTINUITY IS ESSENTIAL

Maintaining confidence in Consolidated’s ability to meet customers’ evolving needs is

essential – and we do this by ensuring swift, seamless delivery of critical infrastructure and increased consumer bandwidth options. We actively manage our network traffic to deliver stable and reliable services to help keep businesses running, students learning and doctors and nurses caring for patients.

Because of the coronavirus, we've seen an increase in data network traffic utilization of approximately 20 percent and an increase in voice traffic of approximately 10 percent. Our network architecture is designed to handle this increased utilization and overall is performing very well.

KEEP PACE WITH CONSTANT CHANGE

If anything, the pandemic has reinforced a certainty that change is constant. It was up to us to support customers and help them rapidly transition employees to remote working, at the same time we transitioned our own employees. One of the biggest changes we made in how we do business was virtualizing our call centers and preparing more than 90 percent of our office employees to work from home, including front line call center teams. We anticipated these changes and made moves before they were absolute necessities, allowing us to be methodical and thoughtful in our approach.

I'm impressed by our leadership team's foresight. Our employees have shown great resilience, taking changes in stride and continuing to put customers first while taking care of their families and communities. We've seen enough success so far to embrace a future, hybrid work model that will include significantly more remote employees who have access to shared office space when needed.

CREATIVITY AND FLEXIBILITY ARE KEY

Disaster response planning has always been a part of our emergency operations plan, but there is no playbook for a global pandemic resulting in social distancing and stay-at-home orders – factors many of us have never heard of, let alone experienced. This has not been

business as usual for Consolidated or our customers.

We're seeing small businesses shift their focus to our online business marketing and website solutions to help keep them connected to their customers despite closings of their bricks-and-mortar locations. School closures have forced families with students to equip themselves with new or faster internet to support distance learning. Consolidated has helped ease the transition to distance learning for schools and students by increasing bandwidth to boost school-based Wi-Fi hot spots and by providing deeply discounted internet service to low-income families with students in need of internet access.

SECURITY ALWAYS PART OF THE PLAN

Nationwide, cyberattacks are up significantly since the coronavirus surfaced. A larger remote workforce invites new and increased security and infrastructure risks for our business customers. We're helping businesses strengthen their own continuity, security and emergency preparedness plans with free security lifecycle reviews.

Our network security team has been at the forefront of educating our customers and our own employees on maintaining digital hygiene, staying vigilant, and learning to stop security breaches before they start.

MISSION GUIDES DECISIONS

Consolidated's mission is to turn technology into solutions, enriching how people work and live. Whether it's upgrading internet speeds for customers to support telework and distance learning or helping companies react to unforeseen events, our consultative approach and investment in our broadband network and customers' success leads us to make the right decisions. In addition, our company values guide our actions and how we have responded to the challenges of COVID-19. We've worked hard to evolve and stay ahead of our customers' needs by embracing change and being innovative. Our ongoing investments

in the communities we serve – specifically our community COVID-19 support – underscores how we build stronger communities, especially during critical times.

It's still too early to assess long-term impacts to our industry as the situation continues to evolve. These disruptions in our daily lives are resulting in higher data usage and unprecedented reliance on broadband solutions for work and entertainment, presenting significant opportunities and challenges for the broadband sector.

Nobody knows for sure what the future holds – what the “new normal” will be. Consolidated is adapting in real time – quickly, creatively and responsively – to meet these and other new challenges. We're looking at a future that underscores – more than ever before – the need for flexible, nimble, resilient business models across our 23-state service area. As a leadership team, we remain focused on guaranteeing the reliability of our networks and our services as well as ensuring positive customer experiences while protecting the well-being of our employees and customers.

Consolidated Communications has provided business services for 125 years, and we know our local teams make all the difference. They work side-by-side with our customers and take on extraordinary challenges under extreme conditions and pressures. We know more challenges are on the horizon, but we also know COVID-19 has stress-tested our operations and protocols. Consolidated learned important lessons from this collective and historic effort, lessons we now carry forward to build best practices that will guide us into the post-pandemic world. ❖

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