

MetroNet Technicians Get Hands-on Training – and Then Some

At MetroNet University, technicians are trained in a faux house to mount equipment, run wire throughout the home and complete other tasks that prepare them for any situation they may encounter during real installations.

By Joan Engebretson

MetroNet, a competitive provider of triple-play services using fiber-to-the-home infrastructure, is taking hands-on technician training to a new level with a program the company calls MetroNet University. Inside the company's warehouse is a faux house with a living room and office setup similar to a customer's home. Technicians are trained to mount equipment to the side of the house, run wire throughout the home, gain entry to crawl spaces and attics and more.

The goal is for technicians to be fully prepared for whatever they will encounter before they do their first installation.

"It's a complete hands-on approach from beginning to end with the technician," comments Kyle Hamilton, vice president of field operations for Evansville, Indiana-based MetroNet.

Up to 12 technicians are trained at a time, going to MetroNet headquarters for a full week of hands-on training. "It allows us to be very consistent," observes Kelvin Fee, MetroNet executive vice president. "Everyone is going to get the same training no matter what city they work in."

The MetroNet training area includes utility poles on which technicians learn safe climbing procedures. It has an area where the techs can learn defensive driving. Also included in the training are safe ladder handling; fiber

preparation, splicing and termination; Category 5 and 6 wiring; how wiring interfaces with video, data and telephony; how to fish fiber through walls; proper wallplate installation and more.

A COMPETITIVE EDGE

MetroNet offers service in more than 90 markets in eight states. The company focuses on Tier-2 markets such as Rochester, Minnesota, or Ames, Iowa, as well as outer suburbs of Chicago and certain Indianapolis markets. The company continues to expand.

Because the company is an overbuilder, Fee explains, "We have to take business from a competitor. We have to do things better. We have to be a cut above our competitors in the way we treat our customers. We don't want to make it about price. We want to make it about the experience."

Technicians go through MetroNet University training about one to two weeks after they are hired and already have their gear. In making hiring decisions about new technicians, MetroNet values people skills above all.

"The best installers sometimes have never done this before," notes Hamilton. "They want to learn a skill set, work for a great company and take care of the customer. If they want to interact with people, I can mold them."

Almost 40 percent of new hires now are referrals from current employees; Hamilton explains, "That's what we want."

The company sees MetroNet University as a means of attracting new hires who want to learn valuable skills to the company.

Training in interacting with customers is another important part of MetroNet University. “In today’s world, the technician has to be able to communicate and educate the customer,” comments Hamilton.

During training, new hires are given examples such as “how you should interact with the customer when you first approach their door and explain what the appointment will entail, along with ensuring they understand we are taking all safety measures, especially as they relate to COVID-19,” Hamilton explains. “We also simulate examples around providing proper customer education on items such as speed tests, channel lineups, finding self-help videos, etc.”

MetroNet University trainers use role playing to show technicians the proper way to interact with customers, Hamilton explains. “Having the physical simulated house allows us to create an environment for the role play that gives them the feeling of what it will actually be like in the field,” he observes.

The most important thing, he says, is “ensuring we simulate how the customer should feel when we are done – we want to leave that home knowing we installed a great product and provided an excellent customer experience.”

WHY METRONET UNIVERSITY?

The hands-on MetroNet University training program started in July. When I spoke to MetroNet in late October, 50 technicians had gone through the training, and the company was in the process of gathering data to evaluate the effectiveness of the program.

“I know we’ll find that people are more skilled,” Fee observes. He is also confident that the company will see less attrition. “Normally, we see attrition after about three to four months,” he explains.

Prior to the introduction of MetroNet University, MetroNet technicians received training through a



At MetroNet University, a technician learns to install box wiring.

local community college. As Hamilton explains, “The previous training environment could not keep up with the evolving industry and pace – therefore it was rushed, and techs were not getting the full support system that MetroNet U provides as it relates to being a new hire. The previous program was not long enough and [didn’t] allow for actual hands-on simulated training like we can provide at MetroNet University.”

With the new program, Hamilton explains, “We have our own trainers. I can get in front of the class day one, and [new hires] will learn the company culture. It adds a great deal.”

The corporate culture piece was missing from the previous training. “We are now able to fully engage our MetroNet culture every day with the new hires so they have so much support from the first day they start through the entire new hire training experience,” says Hamilton.

Fee expects attrition to decline because he believes the training program helps make technicians feel more like a part of the company – a feeling that MetroNet attempts to promulgate by having “people like

myself constantly touching base” with the technicians, he says.

“There are multiple touchpoints along the new hire journey, from the day they start until the day they are fully deployed in the field,” explains Hamilton. “Executives like Kelvin Fee and our president, John Cinelli, reach out throughout that first 90 days and just check in on the associate. The call touches base on how the associate is doing, do they have anything they need and most importantly, just [makes] sure the associate knows we are there and thinking about them. When this type of touchpoint comes from your executive team, it is powerful and really drives home our culture.”

When MetroNet enters a market, the company leaves door hangers on the back and front doors of homes in the area, which leads some consumers to order online or call to order service over the phone, making the MetroNet technician the first and only company representative that the customer sees in person – although door-to-door salespeople also are used.

MetroNet technicians have the option to earn a commission on speed upgrades, Wi-Fi extenders and the like.



At MetroNet University, technicians learn to install house wiring.

“We don’t call it selling,” explains Fee. “The technician is the expert. The goal is to make the customer experience a great one.” By making the customer experience great, MetroNet hopes to gain additional business through referrals from satisfied customers.

When we spoke with Fee and Hamilton, MetroNet had not yet had any women go through MetroNet University. But Hamilton noted that the company does have some women in the field and was expecting to have additional women go through the technician training program soon.

“Diversity is huge for us,” Hamilton observed.

ADVANCED COMMERCIAL TRAINING

Technicians who already were working for MetroNet when the training program was initiated will not go through it. But the company does have an advanced commercial training (ACT) program for current employees that prepares them to work on larger business accounts.

Thirty current employees have gone through that program, which

also is highly hands-on. MetroNet has a commercial setup similar to the simulated home. Technicians use the commercial setup to learn how a server room should look and how to engage with a commercial account.

“The interaction with commercial customers is slightly different in the fact that you are interacting with an IT representative of the company or someone who is not the business owner,” comments Hamilton. “We just want to ensure we are simulating role plays that adjust to that type of interaction. Some of those adjustments include how we will not interfere with the business while it is open, how we brand ourselves within the business and ensure the business has the information it needs to pass along to the business owners.”

Technicians also get the opportunity to personally experience MetroNet’s commercial services when they go through the ACT program. In the future, the company expects to add training for technicians who will serve even larger-scale commercial accounts.

PUMPED-UP TECHNICIANS

MetroNet executives are so jazzed about MetroNet University that they created a six-minute video about the training program. In addition to explaining the program and its benefits, the video includes comments from two technicians who went through MetroNet University.

“It’s kind of like being out in the field but in a controlled environment, which I like a lot,” says technician Kelly Hamad about the program in the video. “Being able to actually get out there and do mock installs ... really helps you learn and gain the knowledge needed to give the best customer service possible.”

Technician William Miller says the program is 10 times better than other training programs. “The environment, the people, the company – they’re all willing to work with you to make things better,” he says. ❖

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