



A Case Study for Managed IT Services

Blue Ridge Mountain Sports



Using IT as a Competitive Edge in Outdoor Outfitting

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Owner, Blue Ridge Mountain Sports

You only have to spend a few minutes with Jeff Smith, owner of Blue Ridge Mountain Sports (BRMS), to see that he’s passionate about what he does. Passionate about his company, his people, about having fun and doing the right thing. When you ask him what makes his company stand out from its competitors, he’s quick to answer: “Each of us who work at Blue Ridge Mountain Sports live and play in the outdoors and we want to help our customers do the same.” He added, “We don’t just sell the outdoor experience – we live it. We’re a company of hikers, climbers, runners and wander-struck travelers who not only enjoy selling outdoor clothing and gear but, more importantly, value making a difference in the lives of our customers and communities.”

The viability of the company, born out of a UVA Darden Business School project in 1970, was initially deemed a “thumbs down.” Smith noted, “The ultimate conclusion of the project was that a retail backpacking business located in Charlottesville would never work.” Now 37 years and 11 stores later, BRMS is a premier outdoor outfitter for the Blue Ridge Mountains, from New Jersey to Tennessee. Smith concluded, “Fortunately, no one took that initial bleak assessment to heart.” Smith, who joined the company in 1986, was a part-time employee; earning his keep by vacuuming floors and, when opportunity knocked, serving as an occasional fly fishing guide. Working his way up through the ranks, Smith eventually bought into the business in 1998 and became its sole owner in 2007.

Blue Ridge Mountain Sports: Their Network

Behind the scenes of this successful retail operation was a growing IT system which, over the last decade, had become both dated and disparate. As a result of business



expansion, the company’s internally managed network had increased in size, complexity and support requirements. According to Don Gugel, BRMS’s IT Manager, “Before Advanced Network Systems, the system we replaced had been in commission since 1990. We had 15 Microsoft terminal servers, 3 SCO-UNIX servers, 2 Microsoft small business servers, 54 terminals, 16 Windows-based local PCs, 16 Windows-based remote PCs and 8 telephone companies across enterprise. At the stores, we were working with Windows NT 4.0 servers that were being utilized as terminal servers. At our headquarters, we ran SCO-Unix for our accounting system, and NT 4.0 Back Office for Exchange, web, and Internet. The terminals in the office were basic PCs using a “Unix terminal emulator,” with Office products for productivity. So you can see that switching from our old dial poll system to a WAN was a huge paradigm shift for us.”

BRMS’s “home grown” infrastructure was typical of many small business environments, with hardware ranging from brand new to four years old, and core software applications with varying revisions and patches. The resulting IT issues, which were spiraling in an uphill direction, left the company’s president feeling like he was in the IT business instead of the outdoor



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adventure business. At the same time, the company was about to embark on the deployment of a new, integrated Point of Sale (POS) system to enhance its ability to centrally manage its retail operations. BRMS's management team knew they needed to make some significant IT changes in order to bring the infrastructure and systems in line with what they wanted to accomplish. The only question remaining was how to get it all successfully accomplished.

Solution Overview

Advanced Network Systems began work by replacing BRMS's antiquated desktop systems to improve the company's basic level of computing and to create a standardized computing platform. The next steps involved the upgrade of the network core to secure and stabilize the delivery of network services along with the establishment of systemized disaster recovery practices. In addition, Advanced Network Systems managed the upgrade of new Point of Sale systems, along with the corresponding reporting, ordering, shipping and inventory management systems. Completion of work on the network infrastructure was followed by a comprehensive Managed IT Services solution where all systems' monitoring, maintenance and management activities are handled on a proactive, scheduled basis. The end result for BRMS is a highly reliable, up-to-date technology platform that can support any requirement or new initiative it needs to compete in the marketplace. For Jeff Smith, it also means the freedom to shift his attention away from how his computers are working and back to running his company.

looking at our strategic business plan which included significant growth in sales volume and profitability. We knew that in order to accomplish the goals we set we'd have to



have a more robust IT solution; one that could effectively integrate and streamline the information in all of our systems, both corporate and the retail stores. When we evaluated the IT resources that we had versus what we thought we were going to need, we couldn't make the two match up. We also knew we needed a solid plan going forward for IT staffing backup and redundancy."

Smith added, "At that point, we had one full-time IT manager with an immense amount of knowledge unique to our company and all of its operations. But what we also really needed— which we knew we couldn't afford—was a whole team of IT experts who specialized in all the different technologies we were going to deploy. When we looked at what Advanced Network Systems had to offer, we realized that if they could do what they said they could, the gaps could be filled at an affordable price."

Why Managed Services was the Right Choice

When BRMS started to evaluate the idea of using Advanced Network Systems' managed IT services program, they were at a pivotal point in their decision making process. According to Jeff Smith, "We were

Why Advanced Network Systems?

The business relationship between Advanced Network Systems and BRMS started out conservatively. According to Don Gugel, "We took a 'show us what you can do' approach." The initial trial started out with smaller-scale projects related

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to improving the performance of BRMS’s existing network. Gugel noted, “One of our biggest tests hinged upon the initial network audit they performed.” Part of the service provided by ANS included educating BRMS’s management regarding the severity levels of various issues and recommendations for corrective actions. He added, “It was an eye opening experience. We realized we had things residing on the network we didn’t know we had; we also realized that we had stuff on there that we didn’t want—things we needed to be concerned about.” Once given the go ahead, Advanced Network Systems quickly and methodically addressed the issues they’d uncovered and made a variety of optimizations which improved management and performance.

From that point on, the relationship between the two companies became more of a business partnership. “Everything we gave them they accomplished successfully. We quickly became comfortable with the advice they were giving us and this opened a dialog about larger, strategic projects,” noted Smith. He added, “This centered on our vision for the company and what it would take from an IT perspective to bring our systems in line with the goals we had set. Over time, our work just naturally morphed into a full-blown managed services support relationship. Now, Advanced Network Systems is one of our key service partners. They’ve helped us with many different projects: from monitoring our servers to representing our interests with third-party vendors— and everything in between. We run anything that’s related to our IT systems and the network by them before we move forward.”

Managed Services: Getting You Back to Business

When asked what the biggest benefits of using a managed IT services program have been, Jeff Smith happily replied, “The big thing is that I’ve gone back to being in the adventure business instead of the computer business. At one point, we were constantly

dealing with network fixes. Now, I don’t think about the network on a daily basis anymore; I know that, behind the scenes, it’s up and running, secure and doing what



it’s supposed to do. We spend more time analyzing important business data; and that’s helped take our operations to a whole new level.”

Don Gugel added, “I don’t need to be continually enrolled in IT courses to stay current on critical issues like security integration or the details involved in server maintenance. I don’t worry about whether we’ve correctly installed a new patch Microsoft has come out with, or if our firewall is configured properly. Having ANS as our IT partner has removed a big burden in terms of taking care of the day-to-day issues that bog an IT manager down. It’s left more time for me to focus on higher level activities like planning.”

Advanced Network Systems: Getting Service Right

When you ask the management team at BRMS what sets Advanced Network Systems’ service apart from other companies, you get a variety of answers:

Don Gugel remarked, “Unlike some other companies we’ve worked with, Advanced Network Systems is a true advocate for us. We can always rely on them to have an honest discussion about how to approach

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and solve an issue. He added, “Whenever possible, they give us a choice about how to implement what needs to be done; sometimes that’s involved helping us figure out a way to do what’s in our best interest while also considering the impact on our corporate culture.”

According to Jeff Smith, “From a strategic standpoint, we meet [with Advanced Network Systems] regularly for reporting, planning and budgeting, and they help us take a big-picture view of what could be. They take the time to understand what we’re trying to accomplish from an overall business perspective and then help us choose the right technology to get there.” Smith also noted, “Along with being great on the tech side, there are lots of soft issues that they get right. When you work with them you know they are solid, permanent and really care about making things run better; not just another fly-by outside consultant. They’ve also helped with things that have to do with the people side of technology. Like how to successfully make new technology work within the context of people’s jobs and how to manage employees who were resistant to change.”

A CEO’s Word of Advice

When asked if he had any advice for others considering the move to Advanced Network Systems’ managed IT services program, Jeff Smith said, “Just do the math. I get CIO level advice and a multifaceted team of IT people who are experts in everything I need—all for less than what I would need to pay to add one IT person.” He added, “Think about how much it costs you not to have the capabilities your business needs to grow and be profitable. Don’t be short-sighted about what you will gain. The benefits we’ve reaped from the program ANS offers have been tremendous.”



More information about Blue Ridge Mountain Sports can be found on the web at www.brms.com.

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