

Retail Entrepreneurs Create an Empowering Identity for Women in Business

Using Cisco network enables Bonitas to offer better home-work balance for employees while accelerating sales and earnings.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY
<p>BONITAS INTERNATIONAL LLC</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Retail • Cleveland, OH • 10 employees <p>BUSINESS CHALLENGE</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Staff productivity and customer responsiveness hampered by lack of real-time access to information • Cobbled-together, “low-cost” technology adds up to more errors, redundant efforts, and staff stress • Company’s commitment to home-work balance undermined by system and process inefficiencies
<p>SOLUTION</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cisco Integrated Services Routers enable real-time access to business applications • Cisco SOHO routers with VPN support provide secure WAN connectivity for home-based workers
<p>BUSINESS RESULTS</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Faster decision making and customer responsiveness contribute to double planned earnings and higher customer satisfaction • 40 percent improvement in operational efficiency restores home-work balance while facilitating a global work day to conduct international business • Technology-enabled business processes help sales increase over 155 percent without adding staff • Network provides the foundation to support an ambitious five-year growth plan

Business Challenge

In 2003, Lisa Harrington, a pediatric nurse and mother of two, had a home business creating and selling beaded lanyards for identification badges and card readers. Her customers were friends and hospital co-workers. Her sister-in-law, Kimberly Martinez, who describes herself as “an escaped financial services executive,” recognized that Harrington’s functional jewelry for the workplace targeted an untapped market. “An ID badge hanging from a nylon lanyard makes you feel like you are wearing a shoelace or a dog tag,” says Martinez. “We decided to create high quality, affordably priced, ‘personality wear’ that encourages self-expression in the workplace.” Within three years the “BooJeeBeads” ID necklaces, badge reels, and eyeglass holders were in over 2,500 retail locations throughout North America.

Today Bonitas International LLC is a multinational business staffed largely by working mothers. “In the dot-com era, employees with no personal commitments, like spouse or children, were called zero-drag employees. Our business is founded by work-at-home moms, and it was fundamental to us that we create a work environment that would attract

and empower women who wanted to successfully manage a career and a family,” says Martinez. “We will do just over US \$2 million in 2007 with completely remote employees, most of whom are work-at-home moms.”

The ability to connect this distributed workforce was constrained by a cobbled-together infrastructure that Martinez likens to a “Whack a Mole” children’s game, in which the company was constantly creating new problems with each new technology “solution.”

“We were always reacting to things, buying software and hardware to solve the next problem. Most of the time employees were looking at day-old customer data downloaded from what we called ‘the mother ship PC’ in Ohio,” says Martinez. “We added remote access software to allow employees to access the inventory management system online, but everyone had to wait their turn to log in. If a user did not log out correctly, someone would have to alert headquarters to restart the PC. When we tried adding remote printing software for our warehouse, the system would show that the order was transmitted but the packing list and mailing label might not print at the warehouse, so the order never shipped.”

As a former executive of a large enterprise company, Martinez recognized the link between a strong technology foundation and business success. “We plan to reach US \$35 million in five years, and I did not want our growth to be hampered by a lack of a sound technology infrastructure.”

Network Solution

In 2006, Bonitas was one of twenty award recipients recognized by Count Me In’s national “Make Mine a \$Million Business” program. The goal of program is to foster a community of 1 million women-owned businesses earning \$1 million or more in annual revenue by 2010. Cisco® is the program’s network technology sponsor, and awarded Bonitas a Cisco Smart Business Communications System package designed and deployed by a certified Cisco channel partner. The Cisco Smart Business Communications System is a tailored family of network products, services, support, and financing options to help small-to-medium businesses (SMBs) and mid-market companies control costs, improve operations, and gain a sustainable competitive advantage.

“The network has turbo-charged our business. We have restored personal time to our home-based workforce, while providing better service to our global customer base around the clock.”

— Kimberly Martinez, CEO, Co-Founder, Bonitas International

Following the principles of the Cisco Smart Business Roadmap, which prioritizes top business challenges and aligns a technology solution roadmap that addresses both short and long term business goals, the Cisco partner began working with Bonitas to understand their primary business challenges and design a Cisco Smart Business Communications System package to support the company’s business goals and work culture. “They led us through a very comprehensive process in a relatively short period of time,” says Martinez. “It was tough for us to face the fact that we had gone on so long without having a more comprehensive IT strategy.”

The Cisco partner provided a Cisco Smart Business Communications System based on the Cisco 1801 Integrated Services Router (ISR) and Cisco 871 SOHO Security Routers. The Cisco router provides the complete functionality and flexibility to deliver secure Internet and intranet access, including support for wired and wireless LAN connectivity, LAN switching, and multiple levels of security protection.

Bonitas has 10 employees based in 7 locations, including Ohio, Florida, Georgia, and Wisconsin. All employees are connected to the company WAN either directly or through secure VPNs, giving them the ability to access the company's business applications running on a Microsoft server. When employees are out of the office traveling (or at soccer games with their kids), they can use the VPNs to stay connected to the information they need. Providing everyone with secure real-time access to data, no matter where they are based, eliminates the problems of bottlenecks, gatekeepers, redundant efforts, and working with day-old information.

Business Results

Since the new secure network foundation was put in place, sales have increased 155 percent and the company has more than doubled its planned earnings, all without adding staff. Only when the new network went live did Martinez fully appreciate the strain and constraints on the business that the piecemeal approach had caused. "We have experienced about a 40 percent improvement in operational efficiency, but the most important change has been our effectiveness as an organization. I never realized just how stressful it was for people not to have access to the information that they need, when they need it. Now they can make better, faster decisions."

Today, any employee can take an incoming call from a customer with access to the most up-to-date information on products, inventory, shipping, and more. "Before, we were unable to answer customer questions about 80 percent of the time. Employees often told customers that our systems were down, when what they really meant was that they had to go hunt for the information." Now Martinez says they have a "once and done" process. "We can take care of that customer in a minute, not call him or her back in an hour or a day. We no longer have frustrated customers waiting for answers. Customers are happier and employees feel better about their jobs."

PRODUCT LIST

Routing and Switching

- Cisco 1801 Integrated Services Router
- Cisco 871 SOHO Security Router
- Dual E Security Router with 802.11g FCC Compliant
- Cisco Catalyst Express 500

Security and VPN

- Cisco VPNs
- Cisco 871 Dual Ethernet router with advanced security

Bonitas is now in a position to recruit job candidates who might otherwise have been out of reach, literally. "Almost nothing in our business is location-dependent anymore. We can hire the right person for the job regardless of geography, and without paying a fortune in relocation expenses."

The network also supports the kind of flexible workday that Bonitas wanted for employees, where work and home responsibilities can be kept in better balance. "Everyone knew that we

were supportive of personal time but the lack of systems often thwarted that goal," says Martinez. "Our Cisco Smart Business Communications System proved that when you take highly effective people and give them the tools to be successful, the results are amazing."

The flexibility in work hours benefits not just the employees, but also the company. "We do a lot of business with Asia, and our employees are happy to work later at night because they are able to take the time that they need for their families during the day," says Martinez. "The network has turbo-charged our business. We have restored personal time to our home-based workforce, while providing better service to our global customer base around the clock."

The cost of ownership of the network has also gone down dramatically. “With our original approach, everything seemed reasonable because it was cheap and off the shelf, but there is a heavy penalty associated with the escalating cost of all of these individual devices and services, and the fact that there is no single person you can call to fix anything and none of it really played together,” says Martinez.

Next Steps

Bonitas continues to expand its product line, recently introducing a new line of products to help parents keep track of children in crowded places if they get separated. Martinez is interested in adding video conferencing to her Cisco network to support ongoing product design. “Today we send digital pictures around the country, and it is reaching the point where we would benefit from face-to-face collaboration without the expense and inconvenience of travel.” Martinez also plans to look into running IP telephony over the Cisco network as sales continue to grow and the company expands its call center capabilities.

“I thought I was going to just get a bunch of network boxes, but the unexpected bonus was a technology roadmap aligned with our business strategy,” says Martinez. “Now I know when I am ready for the next phase of technology growth, I know where to go, and how to get there.”

For More Information

To find out more about Cisco’s Smart Business Communications System and Smart Business Roadmap, go to <http://www.cisco.com/go/smb> and <http://www.cisco.com/go/sbr>.

For more information on the Count Me In program go to: <http://www.countmein.org>



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