

# How to plan a WAN

**To follow** the same path of discovery that Franklin, Tenn.-based MAPCO Express Inc. went through, retailers investigating a wide-area network (WAN) should start by fully envisioning where their company is going in terms of in-store automation. The key to having a successful WAN implementation is to factor in all current and future applications that can run over those connections, says Amanda Cauley, vice president of marketing for Nashville, Tenn.-based Cybera, which supplies WAN service to MAPCO.

Some call it having a “migration plan.” James Gandolfi, senior vice president and general manager of the San Diego, Calif., office of Hughes Network Systems, Germantown, Md., says, “If someone came up to [a retailer] six years ago and said, ‘Why don’t you put in broadband at the service station level?’ They’d respond, ‘What for?’”

Obviously today, that notion is obsolete. “[Retailers] have to look at what’s going to happen five years from now,” Gandolfi says, suggesting that retailers develop a WAN that will support future applications. “What are your migration plans and strategies?”

## Important steps in WAN development

Here’s a step-by-step process for planning the setup of a WAN and figuring out what a WAN can do for a company.

► **Know the basic elements of a WAN.** A WAN comprises a communications provider; broadband technologies (frame relay, DSL, satellite, dedicated lines, etc.); in-store cabling, routers, communications devices (such as a satellite dish); security measures

(firewalls, private connections); and application support (reliability and capability to support numerous automated functions, such as video or enterprise software).

► **Evaluate the chain’s geography.** Identify the levels of access your stores have to broadband providers.

► **Communicate to all areas of the company.** The WAN can affect all areas of the business—everything from marketing and operations to human resources and accounting. All departments must have input into the development of the final WAN solution.

► **Choose with foresight.** Identify your company’s goals for the WAN; these will determine how to calculate a return on investment. Often, companies will focus on specific ends, such as improving data transfer to the detriment of other potential additions to the system. For example, as an afterthought, someone in the company may suggest voice-over/IP, a tie to vocal communication that may drastically cut phone costs. But the WAN the company put in place might not support that option.

► **Research telecommunications options.** Each vendor and each option comes with unique requirements both at the store and at corporate headquarters. Also, new technologies, hybrid solutions and evolved paradigms are

constantly emerging and developing track records.

► **Research vendors specific to internal goals.** The goals of each department may lead to a number of

Before committing to a WAN, retailers should fully envision where their company is going in terms of in-store automation

task-specific software applications, all of which require a certain bandwidth to operate efficiently. This research may also aid in developing ROI strategies, in that companies may be able to pig-

gyback applications that would help cost-justify the project.

► **Pilot test.** For example, do a side-by-side comparison of providers and technologies, with specific stores testing particular options.

► **Rollout tip.** Create a multilevel task force inclusive of store-level staff, corporate departments and executives. Having input from all sources can minimize disruption of service to customers at the stores and promote “buy-in” to the system being installed. In addition, inquire with WAN suppliers on how much time and effort they will commit to the rollout.

—Angel Abcede