

The new deal



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The information superhighway may already be here. But for many in the petroleum retail and convenience store industry, it's still a series of two-lane country roads that could never handle the New York-at-rush-hour-sized data traffic that has built up around it.

As more and more retailers begin building "cities" of data, they find their current dial-up networks—the "roads" that make up their data-movement infrastructure—to be woefully inadequate.

The answer: a wide-area network, or WAN. It's a high-speed communication system that links the corporate office to stores. These connections allow huge amounts of data to fly over copper lines or satellite beams at the blink of an eye.

People have experienced high-speed Internet connections at home, putting in cable or DSL (digital subscriber line) or just signing up for service with their phone carrier. But for business needs, the simplicity, accessibility, reliability and affordability of signing up for high-speed service were all difficult to find in the same place. That may be changing.

Service providers have become more stable. Prices are becoming more reasonable. And other new alternatives, including hybrid carriers, have developed high-speed broadband options that are making sense for retailers.

Franklin, Tenn.-based MAPCO Express Inc., featured as the cover story of this special CSP Technology Issue (see story beginning on p. 14), has signed on with what could be called a hybrid company. MAPCO's communications provider actually built a private, high-speed network using copper cables already in place. From that core network, the supplier links with local providers of DSL service (with frame relay and satellite connections) for "last-mile" connections to MAPCO's stores.

In terms of cost, the option allowed MAPCO to connect all its stores on a budget that they thought would cover only 20% of the chain's 243 locations.

Then of course there are the benefits, both awesome and basic. We're talking things ranging from security camera links that download images in real time to simple services such as e-mail. Data uploads and downloads now take no time, while the need for walking an employee through a technical maintenance call evaporates because help-desk technicians can simply log onto the store-level computer and fix it live.

All that would be impossible without a WAN.

Roads may be an afterthought to building a car. But after building so many cars, roads—and we're talking big roads, highways, multiple-lane freeways, even—become fundamental.

—Angel Abcede
Technology Issue Editor