



FirstBank, Inc., the nation's largest family-owned holding company, is standardizing its voice communications on 3Com's IP-based business telephone solution. Based on the 3Com NBX Communications platform, FirstBank's new system delivers premium-quality, function-rich telephone services over Ethernet local area networks (LANs), enabling the bank to affordably upgrade its communications with customers.

Founded in 1910 and headquartered in Hazelwood, MO, FirstBank is renowned for delivering superior service to customers. The growing 2,500-employee firm acquired six banks this year, increasing its presence to 150 commercial and consumer branches throughout Missouri, Texas, California and Illinois.

"Our phone system is critical to our operations efficiency and customer services," said Mike Benney, FirstBank's manager of information technology. "By standardizing on the 3Com voice solution, we're leveraging advanced features and reliability to better satisfy our corporate and consumer clientele as well as lowering our costs."

Using the NBX platform, FirstBank's executive and administrative staff, bankers and loan officers today enjoy more effective communications between headquarters, branches and customers. The system's automated attendants accelerate customer calls to the appropriate party during and after office hours, while voicemail ensures that no call is ever missed. The NBX platform's message notification feature is another time-saver that visually alerts users to stored voice messages and eliminates users' needs to dial into the system to check for messages.

"Loan officers working with small businesses, in particular, live and die with our phones," Benney noted. "The NBX system lets them respond in a timely, informed manner to clients' needs as it reliably captures calls, makes messages easily accessible and provides clear connections with customers."

FirstBank's IT staff also value the 3Com voice solution's call detail reporting feature, which provides clear visibility into the bank's bandwidth usage to inform staff of changes in system requirements. Using the NBX platform's Web-based administration tool, NetSet, the bank's IT staff can manage every NBX phone remotely, eliminating the need to travel to service sites and saving thousands of dollars a year in technicians' fees.

By 2003, when most of FirstBank's branches will have converted to the 3Com solution, the bank will implement the NBX system's VoIP capability over its wide area network (WAN) to save on long-distance phone charges. The bank will also take advantage of additional productivity-enhancing NBX features, including dial plans that enable four-digit dialing between sites and unified messaging, which lets users access voice and emails from a single contact management application, such as MS Outlook.

"By fully applying 3Com technology across our enterprise, we'll be able to allocate more time and money on our core business objective -- customer service," Benney said. "The NBX system's extensive feature set positions us to more ably fulfill our nearly century old customer service motto of 'Bank First -- Be First.'"

FirstBank's decision to upgrade its phone systems emanated from its desire to implement Voice over IP (VoIP) capabilities, which offer effective strategies for reducing long-distance phone charges and simplifying administration. Previously, the company relied on an enterprise-wide telephone system comprising PBX systems from eight different vendors. The extensive mixed-vendor solution proved extremely complex, time-consuming and costly to manage.

After consulting with Metropark Communications headquartered in St. Louis Missouri, First Bank piloted a 3Com NBX Communications system for three months. Won over by the platform's price/performance, simple installation and ease of operation, FirstBank initially replaced seven of its most outdated legacy vendors' solutions with the 3Com and Metropark solution.

"Metropark is freeing us from the cumbersome and costly management requirements of our legacy systems," said Benney. "We're able to purchase and install an NBX system for less than the maintenance of our old Rolm PBXs. The NBX's plug and play functionality further allows us to convert branches in under four hours. It's that simple."

Currently, FirstBank is using a single NBX chassis at its headquarters and at 35 branch sites and plans to convert 25 to 45 additional branches per year. As the bank continues to grow, FirstBank will deploy NBX systems in all newly acquired branches. To date, the company utilizes close to 600 NBX handsets, each of which plugs into an Ethernet port like a PC or printer, enabling users to easily add, move or change phones in minutes. Each NBX chassis also has approximately 20 lines to the bank's external phone system.

"The 3Com voice system from Metropark allows us to deliver personalized service to customers while saving us a bundle in management costs," concluded Benney. "You can't make a better investment than that, and when all is said and done, we expect the NBX solution to be one of the best business decisions First Bank has ever made."