

IN THE LOOP: A decade of success

**By Thomas G. Robinson, Executive Vice President, CBG Communications Inc.
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I must admit, I'm a planner. While this occasionally annoys some of my colleagues who are more spontaneous because "the man with the plan isn't quite ready yet," when a lot is on the line, proper planning and subsequent dynamic strategic planning, can mean a world of difference to the success of any given venture.

A good example of this is the great success of the Click! Network in Tacoma, Wash. and surrounding communities. After four years of comprehensive planning, Click! recently completed 10 years of successful operation. It is a subsidiary of Tacoma Power, the municipal public power utility in Tacoma, and provides competitive cable television services as well as a wholesale platform for a variety of broadband Internet access and high-speed data transport service providers. The extensive planning included detailed service plans and significant public policy discussions on the most appropriate role for Click!. It was determined early on that Click! would serve as an internal telecommunications platform for Tacoma Power, but would also provide competitive cable television services and provide infrastructure for the city of Tacoma for certain public agency communications (the city of Tacoma manages the institutional network [I-Net] portion of the infrastructure). Overall, use of Click! infrastructure saves both the city and the municipal utility hundreds of thousands of dollars per year in what would otherwise be leased line costs.



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Cyndi Wikstrom, Click!'s general manager, indicates that Click! has "made a huge difference in the marketplace" by working to improve the cable, broadband and telecommunications landscape for residents, businesses and institutions in Tacoma and surrounding municipalities. Specifically, in the last 10 years:

- Competition in the provision of services has increased dramatically concerning wireline telecommunications, broadband Internet access and high-speed data transport. The incumbent cable and telecommunications companies, Comcast and Qwest, have reportedly invested millions over this period to upgrade their infrastructure in order to remain competitive. Additionally, as a wholesaler, Click! provides access to three broadband Internet service providers that utilize Click!'s cable modem platform to compete against Comcast's service. Click! reports that due to this aggressive competition, prices for high-speed Internet services over cable modem in Tacoma are 25 percent to 50 percent lower than in areas with no direct competition.

Additionally, Click! enables high-speed data transport services over its fiber platform for business use utilizing both Gigabit Ethernet and SONET-based services, with as many as four retail providers supplying service over Click!'s wholesale platform. Together with the business class services that Comcast and Qwest provide, this has created a highly competitive marketplace.

During this period of broadband service expansion by Click!, its provider partners and its competitors, the Chamber of Commerce indicates over 100 new businesses have located in the city, due in part to the wide array of broadband services available to them.

- Institutional communications and corresponding network applications have also increased significantly due to the I-Net provided and maintained by Click!. Over the past decade, this network has allowed significant transport of video services, an array of educational applications and much higher speed communications for public agencies.
- Utility operations continue to be enhanced. Wikstrom indicates that Tacoma's power utility "operates more efficiently because of the network provided by Click!."

Specifically, Click! provides the fiber connections from substations throughout Tacoma Power's service area to the utility's control center for monitoring and load management functions. Click! also has been utilizing its HFC network to facilitate the first step in Tacoma Power's "Smart Grid" vision. Essentially, the power utility has been deploying residential meters (12,000 so far) which incorporate both communications and control features in a single integrated meter. The connection for these meters is provided by cable modem over Click!'s HFC platform. The initial implementation is already providing the type of data that will help Tacoma Power determine the feasibility (both financial and technical) of moving this type of Smart Grid implementation forward versus other types of architectures that are being reviewed. There are also 300 commercial customers participating in the initial implementation where Tacoma Power is looking at issues specific to business environments. Tacoma Water is also utilizing Click!'s backbone network to aggregate wireless communications from specially fitted water meters back to the water utility as part of a new automated meter reading pilot project.

On the cable television side, Click! has been focusing, as has the whole cable industry, on continuing to upgrade the advanced features of the network, including expanded high-definition and video-on-demand (VOD) offerings. One area where Click! is excelling over its cable competitors, though, is in the provision of truly local VOD. Specifically, Click! has partnered with a variety of entities to provide a wealth of local VOD content, including organizations like Grand Cinema, which is heavily involved in showcasing local talent and locally-produced motion pictures; the School of the Arts, which has provided original student movies, music, videos, photography and dance performances for inclusion on the local VOD platform; government and public agencies like the Port of Tacoma and TV Tacoma; as well as South Sound TV, which is a partnership with South Sound Magazine. This programming is well-received by Click!'s subscribers and constitutes one of the largest, local video-on-demand platforms in the country.

By any measure, Click! has enjoyed a decade of success. It's currently engaged in strategic planning activities and, judging by past planning and ensuing results, Click!'s next 10 years look even brighter.

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