About Great Lakes Science Center

Great Lakes Science Center makes science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) come alive for more than 300,000 visitors a year through hundreds of hands-on exhibits, temporary exhibitions, the Cleveland Clinic DOME Theater, Steamship William G. Mather, daily science demonstrations, seasonal camps, and more. Funded in part by the citizens of Cuyahoga County through Cuyahoga Arts and Culture, the Science Center has been embraced as a sparkling gem among Cleveland landmarks like the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame along the beautiful Lake Erie shoreline.

The situation

Careful stewardship of resources is second nature to most nonprofit organizations. Cognizant of the fact that part of its funding comes from the people of Cleveland and surrounding communities, Science Center officials used an aging and inadequate phone system for years after it should have been replaced. Connectivity was also a problem, especially when the Science Center offered popular events. At times the phone lines and internet were overwhelmed, frustrating guests and staff.
Solution

AT&T Collaborate℠ enables the Great Lakes Science Center staff to connect more easily with one another. The solution improves productivity by enabling staff to easily add, move, and change phone lines, and scale bandwidth with AT&T Dedicated Internet whenever necessary, so guests can connect with the Science Center by any medium they choose, even when demand is high. Investing in AT&T networking solutions also reduced costs, freeing the Science Center to use precious resources to further its important mission.

Nurturing a love of science and technology

On any given day, Cleveland’s North Coast Harbor echoes with the sounds of excited children and their parents or teachers enjoying a day at the Great Lakes Science Center. Since 1996, the Science Center has worked to instill a love of science, technology, engineering, and math among all visitors, especially children, with a vision of creating a community that values STEM and uses it to inform decision-making and enrich lives.

CFO Ken Sinchak said he and his colleagues view the Science Center as the best possible place to work. “I always say, ‘We do for work what other people do for fun.’ People pay us money to come here,” he said. “And we’re here every day and have access to the fabulous things that go on, so we’re very lucky.”

Susan Allen, the Science Center’s Vice President of Marketing, Communications, and Sales, said the organization supports a learning culture that encourages curiosity and experimentation. “Our brand tag is ‘Stay Curious,’” she noted. “Just as importantly, we bring people together by creating welcoming, fun, and high-quality guest experiences.”

The Science Center also strengthens education by collaborating with other organizations and connecting to STEM resources in the region. America’s competitiveness in the global market can be largely attributed to the genius and hard work of its scientists, engineers, and other innovators. However, many people fear the nation’s ongoing success is threatened, because the education system is not producing enough STEM-capable students.

To stimulate curiosity and experimentation among its young visitors and encourage them to consider STEM careers, the Science Center uses real scientific challenges. It features hundreds of hands-on exhibits, themed traveling exhibitions, daily science demonstrations, and seasonal camps. It is also the site for the 9th grade class of the Cleveland Metropolitan School District’s award-winning MC²STEM High School.
Growing demands strain the infrastructure

Like many nonprofit organizations, Great Lakes Science Center spends money carefully, tending to use available dollars to create exhibits and events that will delight its visitors before investing in infrastructure and other behind-the-scenes necessities. The center made do with a 20-year-old phone system for as long as possible, until it could no longer sustain the problems created by its out-of-date technology.

IT Director Jason Burich said the organization is further challenged by having only one IT professional. “I try to divide my time between keeping us secure, running as we need to, and bringing in new technology to make everybody’s lives a little bit easier,” he said. “It’s incredibly important to have as close to 100 percent internet reliability and speed. Without that, we really can’t function.”

Unfortunately, capacity was an increasingly frequent problem, Sinchak said. “Our systems didn’t have the flexibility to manage demand for popular events.” When the Science Center’s DOME theater, with its six-story-high screen and 11,600 watts of ultra-real digital sound, advertised a highly anticipated film, demand went through the domed roof: “We set up the ticket sale to begin at 10:00 o’clock, and in less than 15 minutes, we were backlogged,” he recalled. “We were jamming the internet and our phone lines were maxed out. We couldn’t really do anything.”

Building a path to continued growth

Sinchak, Burich, and their colleagues recognized a need for a network with the flexibility and capacity to manage demand. “We definitely needed to upgrade the phone system, so we looked at what was the best, state-of-the-art, most flexible system that would enable us to grow in the future,” Sinchak said.

The Science Center compared analog and IP systems from top vendors. “Personally, I had a bias towards going VoIP (Voice over Internet Protocol). We talked to a number of firms and confirmed that we should go that route,” he said. “Having the flexibility to go from 50 gigabytes to a couple of hundred, so this situation wouldn’t happen again, had a lot of appeal for us.”

In addition, because the Science Center’s financial, development, and ticketing software reside in the cloud, Sinchak said, “It made sense for our phone system to be in the cloud, as well.”

Intuitive system supports minds at work

Great Lakes Science Center chose AT&T CollaborateSM, which blends voice, video, instant messaging, and conferencing to unify and strengthen organizational communications. Collaborate enables the Science
Center to share information faster, improve teamwork, and interact more effectively on-the-go by transferring calls between devices to help staff remain productive in any environment.

Allen said it supports the way she and the Science Center team likes to work. “It’s great when we sit in our offices and plan and collaborate, and write and talk about ideas and exhibits,” she said.

The new phone system is easily accessible to staff and guests. “It’s very intuitive. It’s easy to learn, and easy to work with,” she said. It also helps Allen and her staff be responsive to media inquiries. “It’s good to know that we can be out of our offices and be accessible by any phone to a media person on deadline who calls us,” she said.

Facilities Manager Jeff Gadd said the new solutions empower staff. “These solutions make their lives a lot better, and it’s much easier for them to change their passwords whenever they want,” he said. “It’s also easy to delete or add users; we don’t have to wait days for a technician to come and do it for us.”

CFO Sinchak likes the solution’s effect on the Science Center’s bottom line. “An added benefit, from a financial standpoint, is that we no longer have any long-distance charges,” he said.

Amanda Taunt, the Science Center’s director of Guest Services, said staff see an improvement in the workflow and their productivity. “To be able to plan in advance and view things much more quickly lets them be more independent,” she said.

Taunt also finds it faster and easier to give callers the information they need. “In the past, we couldn’t...”

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Amanda Taunt
Director of Guest Services, Great Lakes Science Center
be prepared in advance. If we were closed for a snow
day, it was very difficult to make changes from home," she said. “With Collaborate, someone on my team
can record six weeks’ worth of messages, or menus,
and with just the click of a button, we can implement
them. It’s easier, and we can plan much further ahead.”

AT&T Collaborate℠ enables staff to share information
and make decisions faster thanks to options like
chat, voice, and conferencing. Desk and work cell
phones ring simultaneously, without staff having to do
anything about forwarding their calls. This is especially
valuable for staff whose work regularly takes them
to areas without phones. Staff can also modify the
size and scope of the communications infrastructure
quickly, whenever necessary.

A positive experience from day one

Great Lakes Science Center’s experience with AT&T
is a good one, Sinchak says. “The complimentary
concierge service made the whole process virtually
seamless,” he said. “We went live, and everything
worked. And it’s really worked from day one.”

The attention and care the Science Center received
from its AT&T account team was also very important.
“What really put AT&T over the top were the people.
I think that’s one of the keys,” Sinchak said.

With AT&T Collaborate℠, Great Lakes Science Center
has effectively unified its communications channels,
better positioning the organization for what the
leadership team sees as a bright future. The Science
Center just completed a new strategic business plan

and is poised for initiatives that include a renovation
and expansion of its Science Phenomena Gallery, Allen
said. “We’re working on effective ways to continue to
attract young families to come here, build memories
of good experiences, and walk away knowing that
science is a part of our everyday lives,” she said.

“There are exciting development plans for the
community down here at North Coast Harbor,” she
said. “It has been kind of a sleepy area of Cleveland,
which is interesting because we sit right on Lake Erie, but
we look to be a major player in the area’s continuing
development. The next several years are going to be very
exciting for this area and for the Science Center.”