

Case Study



Fiber helps Howie's Game Shack® customers save the universe



About Howie's Game Shack

Howie's Game Shack operates the largest online interactive game centers in North America. Its four U.S. locations feature more than 800 state-of-the-art gaming computers and game consoles with high-definition LCD displays at which six million hours of gaming has taken place thus far. By bringing players together, Howie's has invented a new form of entertainment, enabling social gaming as players have never before experienced it.

Situation

Most of the games available at Howie's require an Internet connection; many of these, especially the "free to play" multiplayer online games, require significant amounts of bandwidth. This demand often increases as players toggle from game playing to watching videos to visiting social media sites. Howie's needed to supply robust connectivity to deliver a smooth gaming experience and support players' multitasking.

Solution

Howie's Game Shack uses an AT&T fiber-based Ethernet broadband connection to deliver high-speed Internet access with speeds up to 100 megabits per second. The solution supplies all the bandwidth Howie's gamers need to succeed and it has provided a cost-effective way to deliver dramatic increases in capacity.

Entrepreneur Scores with a New Way to Play

Video gaming is often seen as a solitary pastime. To entrepreneur Howard Makler, a longtime gamer, video gaming is best when it brings people together. He set out to promote the social aspect of playing video games by creating "Howie's Game Shack," an interactive gaming center that he says has forever changed the way people play games.

Makler wasn't the first to try to make gaming more communal but he is among the very few to make it work. From a single location in Mission Viejo, California, he has already added two centers in the state and one in Arizona; in the coming year he plans to open locations in Los Angeles, northern California, and Toronto.

Makler found inspiration in the vision of Nolan Bushnell, the inventor of Pong™, Atari™ and Chuck E. Cheese's™ who said, "Despite what some may have you believe, games exist to bring us together; that's where games come from, and that's where we're going back to."

To entice gamers into Howie's Game Shack, Makler installed hundreds of high-end gaming PCs and game consoles with high-definition LCD displays and more than 100 of the most popular game titles. The gaming centers feature the comfy couches and "outrageous" gaming chairs in a friendly atmosphere that offers tournaments, birthday parties, special promotions and world premier game releases.

Howie's Game Shack Facts

Business Needs

An affordable way to support bandwidth-hungry online gaming along with streaming of audio and video content

Networking Solution

Highly reliable fiber-based Ethernet solution satisfies gamers' need for speed

Business Value

Enhanced uptime leads to higher customer satisfaction and supports brand image; scalable solution cost effectively addresses increasing bandwidth needs

Industry Focus

Entertainment

Size

Four game centers supporting nearly 1,000 simultaneous players

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The centers are also decidedly family-friendly. "We evaluate every game in-house, fully immersing ourselves for hours before deciding if it's appropriate for our public environment," Makler said. "We insist on clean facilities – both physically and mentally – generously support charities and receive our guidance from a higher calling."

Latency can be Lethal

Most of the games available at Howie's require an Internet connection. "Free to play" multiplayer online games, require enormous amounts of bandwidth, as do the popular inter-store tournaments that pit players from one Game Shack against teams at others. Since each Howie's location supports up to 250 players at a time, the demand for bandwidth is staggering, but gamers expect to be able to play without interruptions or delays.

But according to Howie's Game Shack President Rick Mansel, it's not just playing games: gamers in general have a voracious appetite for bandwidth. "They don't look at their experience here or at home as simply sitting down and playing a game because they're multitasking at all times – checking their email, checking Facebook, watching something streaming on YouTube or talking on Skype™"; he said. It's not unusual for players to have seven or eight windows open at once, toggling from one application to the next.

For that reason it's critical that Howie's can supply the bandwidth to support their patrons' online activities and deliver a pleasing experience. "From our gamers' point of view, that's the heart of what we do," Mansel said. "We need to provide the ability for them to interact on the Internet and have a really smooth gaming experience."

Howie's initially leased T1 lines to supply Internet connectivity, but as its business grew it became clear that the gaming centers needed more bandwidth. An internal survey revealed latency, a time delay that can result when bandwidth is insufficient, as customers' top complaint. "In the gaming world, latency can cost you a game, and if you're watching a movie, it can just cause you tremendous aggravation," Makler said. "It all was about needing more bandwidth."

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The company initially considered installing more T1 lines, but found it to be cost-prohibitive. "When you start trying to bond together enough T1 lines to generate the kind of bandwidth we're talking about, it gets really expensive," he added.

Fiber is a Game Changer

AT&T suggested Howie's replace its T1 lines with an AT&T fiber-based broadband connection. In addition to delivering the blazing speeds Howie's wants to provide for gamers, fiber proved more cost effective. "It was an absolutely easy decision to go with fiber because there's a huge difference in cost," Makler said. "If fiber is available, you would be insane not to use it."

Because Howie's Game Shacks are located within shopping malls, accessing fiber could have been an issue. "It's not like an office building where it's more common that the infrastructure for high-speed Internet is already there," Mansel said. "Mall locations typically aren't huge consumers of bandwidth, and so the infrastructure in those locations is not as sophisticated as in a high-rise office building, for example."

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– Howard Makler, CEO, Howie's Game Shack

Howie's was able to replace its multiple bonded T1 lines with a single AT&T Ethernet fiber broadband connection thanks to the [AT&T Fiber to the Building Program](#). This program proactively installs fiber and electronics to select multi-tenant buildings, including shopping malls, and provides the infrastructure to support high-speed Internet access service.

Advanced network management tools allow Howie's IT staff to monitor consumption data on demand and get real-time alerts if bandwidth should dip at any location. "We can actually drill in any time we want and monitor what applications they're running," Makler said. "That's how we learn where the bandwidth consumption is going and what kind of bandwidth we think we're going to need."

Makler said the company is impressed with the quality of AT&T. "We're getting a far better network, with far greater reliability," he said. "There's a big difference with AT&T, as we've learned."

In addition, Howie's executives found the AT&T account team to be highly invested in their success. "Our sales team was very creative and demonstrated a high degree of care in the way they helped us plan for our bandwidth needs," he said. "There are a lot of vendors out here that offer Internet bandwidth for very aggressive pricing," Mansel said. "But we looked at dealing directly with AT&T as being a big plus. And obviously the ability to interact with the local people and the confidence we had in them helped us make the decision."

Bringing People Together

Upgrading to fiber has made Howie's gamers very happy, Makler said, by eliminating latency and the need to regulate the amount of bandwidth each person can use. The growth has been rapid as well – in just a year the company moved from nine to 50 megabits over T1s and then to 100 megabits over fiber. "We literally had people coming up to us and saying, 'Wow, what a difference,'" he said. Complaints disappeared, and the company was able to provide a better experience for its gamers.

The abundant bandwidth has become a selling point for Howie's Game Shack. Publicity and social media posts about a recent party celebrating the re-launch of Howie's Mission Viejo location, for instance, touted new computers and high-speed bandwidth. "If you dig through our past posts you'll find that bandwidth had been a recurring theme," Makler said.

As it chooses new locations, the company is so convinced of the value of its AT&T fiber broadband network that its expansion plans hinge on the availability of the solution. "We have consulted with our AT&T account team to make sure as we look at new locations that AT&T is in a position to service them properly," he said.

The company's new stores, which Makler calls "Howie's 2.0," will have futuristic video walls and special areas to accommodate tournaments. He expects that the new locations will require even more bandwidth, as Howie's plans to introduce mobile gaming. "It's still based upon

bringing people together so that they can play, whether on a mobile device, a console or a PC. It really doesn't change the desire to be together."

Bringing people together is easier for Howie's Game Shack since the company began working with AT&T, Makler said. "The AT&T fiber solution is significantly more cost effective, has significantly increased our gamers' satisfaction and has provided us with significantly improved customer service."

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