

## Telecom provider aims to minimize support hassles

A Scottsdale phone-service provider says it can help small businesses access the communications technology used by big corporations.

The biggest benefit, according to CEO Clark Peterson, is that small companies don't have to operate the communications-switching equipment themselves, leaving the technical work to the company.

Instead, Telesphere operates communications-switching terminals, allowing them to provide e-mail notifications of voice messages that come with the sound file attached.

"Having a centrally located service environment is just a better way to receive phone service," Peterson said. "Having a separate PBX (switching) box in every office will be an antiquated way of receiving phone service. (Telesphere) requires no intelligence on premise."

The company has several nationwide competitors, including Aptela of McLean, Va., CallTower of San Francisco, and even Peterson's former company, XO Communications of Reston, Va.

Not to mention the big telecoms' offerings, including Qwest, which has a major presence in Arizona. Qwest recently was awarded a two-year, \$15 million contract to serve the state of Ohio.

Telesphere provides all the technical assistance for its service.

"One of the biggest problems with phone service is that when there is a problem, who handles it, the equipment guys or the service guys?" Peterson said. "With Telesphere, it's all us."

Some of the other features the company promotes include its ability forward calls and take voice messages even when the business experiences a physical disruption at the home office.

The company has customers in 40 states, some of which have 50 locations across the country, he said.

"We can provide them service as though they are all under one roof," Peterson said. "Some of those people might even be working out of their house."

They target companies with five to 200 lines.

The company launched in 2000 and has hosted switching service for three years.

"Right now everything is forming," Peterson said "We have great financial backers."

Peterson joined early this year as CEO. He has 23 years in the industry, working as president of major markets for Clearwire, regional president for XO Communications and also for Nextlink (which became XO). The BYU graduate is from Las Vegas, but moved to the Valley from Seattle.

Telesphere's service ranges from \$25 a user per month for unlimited local and long distance and Internet to about \$50 for full service, with handsets.

Peterson declined to name major clients because of privacy concerns, but said they span the spectrum from banking to real estate.

Among the newest users is the Arizona Small Business Association, which connected its 15 employees with full service, where Telesphere even maintains the hardware.

They are enjoying the four-digit direct dial between offices in Phoenix and Tucson, simultaneous dialing for cell and deskphones and even a “soft phone” feature that allows

CEO Joan Koerber-Walker to dial contacts from her laptop’s address book and speak through a headset plugged into the computer.

“We did a lot of research,” Koerber-Walker said. “We could go with anyone nationwide, absolutely. We wanted a partner that would support us well. And second, we looked at how stable is the company, who had the most up-to-date technology.”

All the new applications haven’t been difficult for the staff to learn, she said.

“It’s not rocket science,” she said.

The company also gained the trust of investor John Chapple, the former CEO of Nextel Partners, which was acquired by Sprint for \$9 billion. Chapple’s venture capital firm is a minority shareholder in Telesphere, although the two did not disclose the amount of Chapple’s investment.

“I have been involved in providing communications services to businesses and consumers for nearly 30 years, and have personally witnessed these services become the lifeblood of businesses large and small,” Chapple said when the investment was announced in August. “Telesphere’s service offering has the opportunity to extend valuable business- telecommunications services to the business masses.”