

CUSTOMER SUCCESS STORY

CISCO WIRELESS INTERNET SOLUTION HITS A HOME RUN FOR HOUSTON BASEBALL FANS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

CUSTOMER

- Minute Maid Park

INDUSTRY

- Entertainment

BUSINESS CHALLENGE

- Provide stadium fans with Internet access to enhance game experience
- Enable media to better communicate with news desks nationwide
- Deploy a secure, fully functional solution in a short timeframe

NETWORK SOLUTION

- Cisco wireless solution delivered by Time Warner Cable and Wide Area Management Services (WAMS)

BUSINESS VALUE

- Enables fans to access real-time statistics and updates during a game
- Enhances fan satisfaction and increases revenues
- Lays foundation for a variety of wireless applications to streamline operations

Minute Maid Park, home of the Houston Astros, partners with Time Warner Cable, WAMS, and Cisco Systems to deploy a Cisco wireless networking solution that enhances the ballgame experience for fans.



BUSINESS CHALLENGE

Minute Maid Park, home of the Houston Astros, is one of the newest Major League Baseball stadiums in the United States. The facility seats more than 40,000 fans and had more than 3 million visitors last season.

The Astros organization has a long history of innovating to enhance the game experience for fans. Minute Maid Park itself was built in 2000 with a retractable roof, so Houston fans could watch baseball played outdoors on real grass for the first time since 1964. In the spring of 2004, the organization decided it was time to innovate once again. They wanted to be one of the first ballparks in the country to offer fans Internet access while they watched the game.

The Houston Astros leadership assumed that some fans would use the service to read e-mail or communicate with clients and work colleagues during their afternoon at the park. However, the ultimate goal was to help enable ordinary fans to review player statistics, updates, and real-time injury reports in the middle of the game—something that had previously been available only to fans watching the game on TV from their homes.

“We do everything we can to make the experience better for the fan,” says Brad Bourland, Director of Information Technology for Minute Maid Park. “We’re such a stat-driven sport. A lot of fans are really interested in stats such as what Jeff Bagwell does against a certain pitcher, or Craig Biggio’s lifetime batting average with the bases loaded. It sounds granular, but our fans really care about that sort of thing.”

While Internet access for fans was critical, Bourland also wanted to help ensure that the wireless solution could support a variety of other applications to streamline operations in the park. That meant the network had to be robust, secure, and highly flexible.

In summer 2004, Bourland and his team began to move ahead with implementing an Internet solution for the ballpark. The ballpark was hosting the 2004 All-Star Game in July, and Bourland was determined to have the solution up, running, and pilot-tested before that time. He knew that the park would be hosting more media for the event than ever before, and he believed that the solution would be heavily used by reporters. In the weeks leading up to the game, Minute Maid Park was also hosting an 80th birthday celebration for former president George H.W. Bush. Security would be extremely tight, making it difficult for technicians to work freely in the park and interrupting the deployment schedule.

With a tight timeline and thousands of potential users, Bourland needed the solution to work flawlessly from the first day it went live. “The solution had to be great because it would represent Minute Maid Park and the Houston Astros,” he says. “Outages, poor service, and, especially, security lapses, were not an option.”

“You work for an organization like the Houston Astros, representing Major League Baseball, and you take a lot of pride in it. You want to be the best. That includes our IT staff, and we expect the same from our vendors and the people that we work with. That’s what we’ve gotten with Cisco, WAMS, and Time Warner. I can’t say enough about how great it has been to work with them.”

— Brad Bourland, Director of Information Technology, Minute Maid Park

NETWORK SOLUTION

Choosing the right partners for the technology, Internet service, and deployment was the first and most important decision. When it came to the wireless technology, Bourland believed that Cisco Systems® was the only choice. Minute Maid Park already had a Cisco® network backbone, and Bourland’s team had a great deal of experience working with Cisco solutions.

“We use only Cisco equipment here, because it’s a bar above everything else,” he says. “Security was a huge concern, and in our minds, Cisco and security were synonymous in this realm.”

Bourland and the Houston Astros team chose Time Warner Cable to provide Internet service. The Astros’s leadership had a great deal of confidence in Time Warner’s service. They also believed that the relationship would create mutual marketing opportunities. Time Warner brought in Wide Area Management Services (WAMS) to deploy and provide ongoing management and support for the solution. WAMS had extensive experience designing, installing, and maintaining large wireless projects, and had been responsible for implementing successful wireless solutions at other stadiums.

The WAMS and Time Warner Cable team designed the network to be completely separate from Minute Maid Park’s existing Cisco backbone to help ensure the security of other stadium applications and simplify ongoing management of the solution. The team deployed 95 Cisco Aironet® wireless access points throughout Minute Maid Park, covering all fan seating areas, restaurants, and common areas—29 acres in all. The access points support the IEEE 802.11b and 802.11g wireless standards, and offer connection speeds up to 54 Mbps.

The access points are connected through 11 Cisco Catalyst® switches, which offer the performance, intelligence, and security to effectively manage bandwidth across a large, public wireless hotspot. The Cisco switches also support Power over Ethernet (PoE), which delivers both

network connectivity and power to wireless access points over a single Ethernet cable. Without this capability, the deployment team would have had to find a way to connect power supplies and power cables to all 90 access points throughout the park.

“Without the PoE capability there would have been an enormous amount of wiring,” says Bourland. “I don’t see how we could have done it.”

At the core of the solution, a Cisco router securely connects the park with the Internet and delivers secure, high-quality service to large numbers of users. The team also deployed the Cisco Wireless LAN Solution Engine (WLSE) to easily monitor and manage the entire wireless solution from a central location. To help ensure that the solution could support future requirements, the solution’s router and switches, as well as the link to the Time Warner Cable network, are connected through fiber optic cable. The solution can support multiple gigabit speeds, so there is virtually no limit to the types of applications that Minute Maid Park can deploy.

Despite the scope of the solution and the challenges presented by the tight deployment timeline, the WAMS and Time Warner team was able to install, test, and bring the solution live in just two weeks—well in time for the All-Star Game.

“We were very pleased with our partners’ efforts,” says Bourland. “Once everything was decided, they got started and got it done.”

BUSINESS VALUE

Today, the Minute Maid Park wireless solution is fully operational. It is the largest wireless hotspot in Houston and one of the largest in the United States. Many fans are already using the service, both to stay connected to the office while they’re away, and to download real-time statistics, information, and trivia about the game.

The solution was also extremely effective during the All-Star Game. Sports media covering the game were able to submit photos, video footage, and text stories to news desks around the country.

“It was very convenient for them,” says Bourland. “Media were located throughout all parts of the ballpark. They were able to file their stories much faster than if they had only dialup, or if they had to go to another location in the park for a wired connection.”

The solution has also proved to be extremely flexible. During the All-Star Game, Major League Baseball IT staff decided that they wanted to add cameras in the field, and stream live video of the game over the MLB.com Website.

“We used the VLAN [virtual LAN] capabilities of the Cisco switches to set up a new VLAN, drop in a Cisco PIX® firewall, and securely connect the cameras to our ISP. Web users were able to watch the entire game from that unique vantage point. Working with MLB Advanced Media, we set up the whole thing on the spur of the moment, and had it live in just a couple days.”

Delivering Value

Today, fans at the park can connect with Time Warner Cable’s Road Runner Speed Zone service at prices starting at \$3.95 for four hours. Additionally, as part of a joint marketing initiative, thousands of Time Warner Cable customers throughout the greater Houston region can try the service for free.

According to Bourland, Minute Maid Park will gain return on investment (ROI) from the new solution in multiple ways. The organization will gain revenue from ballpark visitors using the solution, but also from additional applications that Bourland and his team plan to implement to help support other park vendors. In addition, because the network is a 24-hour, seven-day-a-week hotspot, when the park hosts other events, such as concerts, it will also be able to offer network services to those event promoters and their vendors.

Most importantly, Bourland believes that the solution is helping to increase fans’ excitement about the Astros and about the experience at Minute Maid Park.

“You can get a huge return on investment from fans coming out to the park and spending more time here,” he says. “We make money from tickets, but when the stadium is full, fans are also buying drinks, hotdogs, memorabilia, etc. And if the fans have an enjoyable experience, enhanced by wireless access, they will come back time and again.”

Bourland is extremely pleased with the solution, and credits its success to the partners that Minute Maid Park chose.

“You work for an organization like the Houston Astros, representing Major League Baseball, and you take a lot of pride in it,” he says. “You want to be the best. That includes our IT staff, and we expect the same from our vendors and the people that we work with. That’s what we’ve gotten with Cisco, WAMS, and Time Warner. I can’t say enough about how great it has been to work with them.”

NEXT STEPS

In the coming months, Bourland plans to continue to expand the wireless solution and provide new, enhanced services and content for fans. Minute Maid Park’s concessions vendor, ARAMARK, has also begun planning applications that will run over the wireless network. Ultimately, the company wants to help enable staff to take food and beverage orders throughout the park, and even process credit cards, using wireless PDAs. With Minute Maid Park’s robust, scalable, wireless solution, adding these and other enhancements will be a relatively easy process.

“We’ll continue to develop new ideas to streamline our processes and give our fans a better experience at the game,” says Bourland. “We feel like we’ve chosen the right partners and the right provider, so the sky is the limit.”

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Cisco Systems has already helped entertainment organizations worldwide use wireless technology to streamline operations and enhance customer satisfaction. To find out how Cisco can help your organization, contact your local account representative, or visit: www.cisco.com.

This customer story is based on information provided by Minute Maid Park and describes how that particular organization benefits from the deployment of Cisco products. Many factors may have contributed to the results and benefits described; Cisco does not guarantee comparable results elsewhere.

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