

# The NBA's Memphis Grizzlies—Cisco IP Communications a 'Slam-Dunk' for Reliability, Cost Savings, and Future Growth

## Background

The National Basketball Association is much more than slam-dunks, three-point shots, and magnificent new arenas. With franchises valued in the hundreds of millions of dollars, and fierce competition from all other forms of entertainment, NBA teams must work hard off the court to attract corporate partners and fans, retain their loyalty, and build both long-term relationships and brand equity.

The Memphis Grizzlies recently faced such a challenge. When the team, then six years old, relocated from Vancouver, BC, to Memphis, TN, in the summer of 2001, the Grizzlies had only four months before the opening tip of their 2001-02 season. They needed to reach out quickly and effectively to Mid-South fans and the business community and convince them that a ticket to a Memphis Grizzlies game was a ticket to first-class entertainment. They had to convince Memphians that they were truly "big league" by providing superior customer service. And they had to do so "on the run," with almost no lead time.

National retailer AutoZone, headquartered in Memphis, assisted in offering office space for the team while it sought more permanent quarters. The Grizzlies completed negotiations with local officials for the construction of a state-of-the-art arena that will open in the fall of 2004. Leading-edge amenities for premium customers will be crucial marketing tools for selling high-revenue luxury suites, club seats, and season tickets for the new arena, to be called the FedExForum.

## Challenge

For the Grizzlies' IT staff, enabling these myriad activities created another imperative—to build a first-class voice and data network capable of meeting the Grizzlies' immediate and future needs. In the near term, the Grizzlies needed to set up a contact center for ticket sales and customer service quality assurance; they needed to support 125 employees across the team's various departments; and they needed to plan with an eye to the future.

"This was a green field," says Mike Garrison, who began working on the network as a member of AutoZone's IT staff and now serves as the Grizzlies' director of information technology. "Our priority was to set up a telephony and voice mail system. We didn't inherit any PBXs (private branch exchanges)—or hardware of any kind—from Vancouver. So we began to explore IP Communications as a better alternative to traditional PBXs."

IP Communications promised advanced voice, data, and converged services—IP telephony, unified communications, IP video/audio conferencing, and IP contact center—that would enable more efficient interaction among employees and customers. And, as he researched IP Communications, Garrison found several cost justifications as well.



“First of all, IP yields reduced cabling cost—you need just one cable for telephones and computers,” he says. “Then there’s the simplicity of having only one vendor to call for voice, data, and call center services. The PBX world is so compartmentalized: one vendor does the adds, moves, and changes; another does the software; another, the hardware installation; another is the telecom provider that delivers the calls to your enterprise.”

“With IP telephony, we don’t have to call anyone for adds, moves, or changes—we can handle those ourselves,” Garrison adds. “That’s really important because our department consists of a director and a network manager, and we need to keep administration simple and cost-effective without increasing our headcount. With our new IP Communications system, we could also do software upgrades ourselves. Not many people think about upgrading software, and how many upgrades you might have to do in a year.”

The new, 18,000-seat FedExForum will feature advanced voice, data and wireless connectivity—and experience-enhancing services—as inducements for corporations and individuals to buy premium seating and luxury suites. The new arena, Garrison says, “will be a showcase for new technology.” In order to provide these services, the new network would have to be able to scale to more than 2,000 Ethernet ports, 700 IP telephony ports, and 300 analog ports.

Another challenge was portability. Piggy-backing on the AutoZone network during the team’s first few months in Memphis was a temporary solution. The Grizzlies needed to deploy their own voice and data network as quickly as possible, and then move it to its permanent office space.

“Our intention was to get our new network up while we were still in the AutoZone building, and then move everything over to our permanent office space without a disruption in service,” Garrison says. “So any new network would have to be resilient, reliable, and easy to migrate.”

Building the network on a Cisco IP Communications platform, Garrison says, made sense on all counts. In addition, Cisco helped him demonstrate the strengths of IP Communications to the team’s upper management. “I asked Cisco for a demo of 15 IP phones connected to Cisco CallManager,” he says, “and we placed these phones on the desks of people throughout the organization, including those involved with making the decision on IP Communications. We set them all up with Cisco Unity voice mail. They used the IP phones in parallel with their old telephone sets, and they soon became very comfortable with them.”

The demonstration, and a detailed report on IP Communications, convinced the team’s executives to give the green light. “They endorsed our recommendation,” Garrison recalls, “and told us we could build our own network.”

## Solution

Garrison evaluated products from Avaya before selecting Cisco Systems as the Grizzlies’ technology partner. The decision was based on Cisco’s best-of-breed solution set, and its track record of success. The choice was made in February 2002 and network design and deployment began that month; the system went live in March 2002.

The Cisco solution includes 125 Cisco 7960 IP phones on all Grizzlies’ desktops; dual redundant Cisco CallManager 3.1 call processing systems; Cisco Unity 3.1—a powerful unified messaging system that also provides advanced voice messaging capabilities, such as intelligent routing—on all desktops; Cisco IP IVR 2.1 for interactive voice response; Cisco IPCC Enterprise Edition software and Cisco Agent Desktop to provide contact center functionality—including automatic call distributor (ACD), computer telephony integration (CTI), and comprehensive reporting functionality for the Grizzlies’ 25 contact center agents; Cisco Catalyst 4006 switches; a Cisco VG200 Voice Gateway for connection to PSTN (public switched telephone network) services; and a Cisco 7200 Series router and a Cisco PIX firewall for Internet access and security.

“Cisco worked very closely with us through the whole implementation process,” Garrison says. “We brought the equipment into the AutoZone building, set it up there, brought the network live, had everyone trained on it, and then used it for two weeks before we moved into our permanent office space.”



## Results

The network passed its first test when it migrated quickly and successfully from the initial site to the new offices. The move was flawlessly handled in a ten-hour period, with no downtime outside the move window. "We had the phones up, and the network working—everything, including e-mail and computers—by 5 p.m. on our first day in the new facility," Garrison says. "We built our contact center functionality very smoothly, based on Cisco IP IVR and Cisco IPCC Enterprise."

Garrison's department has enjoyed the new ease of administration and users are beginning to take advantage of the functionality of IP Communications. "It's going great," he says. "Using the Cisco solution has enabled us to simplify our software updating processes, and a lot of our users are appreciating the power of the IP phones. With its convergence-based capabilities, the telephone is becoming much more integrated with our processes and aspects of our business."

In his initial forecast, Garrison compared the costs of a PBX for voice traffic against the savings offered by IP Communications: reduced cabling costs; a smaller equipment footprint; a single vendor for voice, data, and call-center services; and the ability to bring adds, moves, and changes and software updates in-house. "It was obvious that IP Communications was the better choice," he says. In addition, Garrison expects that his two-person MIS department that manages the current 125-user network will increase only slightly to handle the network when it swells to 2,000 users in the new arena in two years.

Before the Grizzlies began their second season in Memphis, Mid-South fans were excited by the team's off-court move to hire NBA legend Jerry West as president of basketball operations. West, a Hall of Fame guard, is also the front-office architect of the three-time NBA champion Los Angeles Lakers—so successful, he was described in 2003 by *Sports Illustrated* as "the benchmark against which all sports executives, not just NBA executives, are measured." Based on his track record, many believe that the Grizzlies will be an NBA power when the FedExForum opens its doors in October 2004. The fans that flock to arena will experience excellence on the court, and leading-edge fan-friendly technology in the stands—such as the wireless, on-demand delivery to their personal digital assistants of statistics, game, and NBA-wide information.

"We see our IP network as a showcase for the technology and for Cisco products when we move into our new arena," Garrison says. "We'd love to set up a suite with all the equipment and give tours to the public, to let people see the new applications that are possible with IP Communications."



Corporate Headquarters  
Cisco Systems, Inc.  
170 West Tasman Drive  
San Jose, CA 95134-1706  
USA  
www.cisco.com  
Tel: 408 526-4000  
800 553-NETS (6387)  
Fax: 408 526-4100

European Headquarters  
Cisco Systems International BV  
Haarlerbergpark  
Haarlerbergweg 13-19  
1101 CH Amsterdam  
The Netherlands  
www-europe.cisco.com  
Tel: 31 0 20 357 1000  
Fax: 31 0 20 357 1100

Americas Headquarters  
Cisco Systems, Inc.  
170 West Tasman Drive  
San Jose, CA 95134-1706  
USA  
www.cisco.com  
Tel: 408 526-7660  
Fax: 408 527-0883

Asia Pacific Headquarters  
Cisco Systems, Inc.  
Capital Tower  
168 Robinson Road  
#22-01 to #29-01  
Singapore 068912  
www.cisco.com  
Tel: +65 6317 7777  
Fax: +65 6317 7799

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