

business solutions

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50+ Years of Innovation at Suther Feeds



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tele-communications

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Now's the time to set up your New Year's resolutions. Did you know that people who write down their goals are more likely to meet them? The same is true for businesses. This issue of *Business Solutions* covers several areas—reputation management, efficiency, focus, and turning challenges into opportunities—that you might want to look at in 2016.

First, on page 3, you'll see why **Managing Your Online Reputation** is so important. Left untended, this key component of your online strategy can have a negative impact on your business.

The Business Spotlight on pages 4 and 5 features **Suther Feeds**, a locally operated business that started in 1963 with the fresh idea to remove obstacles for customers. That notion has driven the company's success throughout its 50+ years in business.

On page 6, we encourage you ask: Are you **Distracted by Wearing Too Many Hats?** Common tasks like marketing, social media, bookkeeping, and administration can pull you away from your core functions. Thankfully, many of these tasks can be farmed out to competent providers.

Finally, on page 7, those who **Pay Attention to the Worsening Culture of Distraction** recognize that attempting to multi-task doesn't actually make us more efficient, and in fact is likely to make us less so.

Whatever you decide to focus on in 2016, we are here to help. I encourage you to reach out any time to let us know how we can contribute to your goals in the coming year.

Sincerely,

Brian Thomason
CEO

Blue Valley Network of Companies





Managing Your Online Reputation

What are people saying about your business online?

In business, bigger isn't necessarily better. There are advantages to being small, including the ability to provide service that's truly personal. As both businesses and customers move toward online interactions, this ability can be leveraged even further. Small businesses can easily monitor what customers are saying about them and use the information to provide better service. They can also use social media to foster strong connections that lead to more sales.

On the down side, any negative information appearing online can be harmful to a company's reputation. Fortunately, there are steps you can take to find out what people are saying about you, and to repair any damaging remarks.

Monitor

First, monitor the Internet for potentially unflattering information about your company. Use online tools to monitor social media sites, especially Twitter and Facebook. For example, you can receive emails when keywords you choose show up on Twitter, or when someone posts a comment on your Facebook fan page. Also, set up a Google alert for your business name and any product brand names; Google will send you email messages that include your online mentions.

React

If you find negative information posted on another website, ask the owner of

the site to remove it. If they refuse, don't waste time trying to force the issue. Instead, create more positive information about yourself in order to push the negative comments down in search rankings, so it's less likely to be seen. Positive content can be added in the form of new pages on your website, press releases, articles, and posts on other sites. You can also ensure higher search rankings by using search engine optimization (SEO) techniques.

Respond

Within social media sites and other places you can comment (such as blogs), respond to negative comments as soon as possible after they appear. Resist the temptation to reply with anger when someone criticizes your company. Keep the interests of your customers in mind and determine whether a public or private response is more appropriate.

Respond to positive mentions as well. Thank people who compliment your company, and engage them further by asking for an opinion, or letting them know about new product offerings.

Whether positive or negative, look for patterns in customer comments and use them to guide the future direction of your business.

Participate

Actively participate in social media to establish relationships and a reputation as an expert in your field. Posting valuable information, deals, images, or even just entertainment brings you closer to your customers. Remember that strong relationships on social media sites make negative information less likely to be believed.



Suther Feeds

Providing customers with opportunities and resources for over 50 years

Larry Wessel, Suther Feeds employee.

In 1963, Melvin Suther had the idea of selling nutritional supplements while grinding complete feed rations on the farms and ranches of Northeast Kansas. This was a new idea at the time and it has survived to this day, though the supplements have changed over the years.

Continued Success Through Changing Times

The idea was the start of Suther Feeds' focus on opportunities, which has attracted thousands of customers and a team of nutrition professionals in six states, with feed manufacturing in 18 locations including the primary facility in Frankfort, Kan. The company offers cattle ranching, cattle feeding, direct link cattle marketing, commercial swine, and show feeds. Identifying opportunities has led to customer success, based on solutions and programs recommended by livestock nutrition experts who get to know each customer's business.

Chad Hiltgen, Sales Manager at Blue Valley/Networks Plus, says, "Suther Feeds is a great example of exactly how innovation is born—through recognizing a very real need and not being afraid to step forward with a solution. We are honored to be their technology provider and have the opportunity to assist in making their day to day operations smoother while they focus on their customers."

Dr. Michael Johll, Chief Operating Officer at Suther Feeds, notes the company maintains a balance between its unwavering commitment to supporting customers and making changes necessary to propel the business forward. One challenge the company will face in the next few months is a regulatory shift from the state to federal level. Johll explains, "Starting in December 2016, we'll have to have a veterinary feed directive (VFD) from each customer to sell them certain medicated feeds. Our ability to meet this challenge will be tied to our ability to manage the technology needed to drive it."

Specifically, more people will need real-time access to more information contained in databases. In addition, record retention will become more critical. Johll says, "We're still exploring what the technology will have to look like. We're waiting on a final ruling from the government to know exactly what we'll need. Blue Valley and Networks Plus have been instrumental in the last couple of years in helping us get up to speed with technology, and we know they'll help us through this as well."

Commitment to Customers, Employees, and Community

In addition to keeping up with industry changes itself, Suther Feeds serves as a resource for its customers, primarily second- or third-generation ranchers who look to employees to keep them informed. In particular, says Johll, "There is a lot of fear among our customers about the upcoming VFD deadline. We've assured them that we'll make sure they're prepared and will help them make decisions related to their operations."

Blue Valley and Networks Plus have been instrumental in the last couple of years in helping us get up to speed with technology."

— DR. MICHAEL JOHLL, CHIEF OPERATING OFFICER, SUTHER FEEDS

The company has 30 employees in two main departments: manufacturing and logistics, and sales. Johll says, "Employees in both areas know Suther Feeds is a very stable company. We renewed our commitment to staying in business two years ago when we built a new manufacturing plant. In addition, employees enjoy a lot of flexibility as well as always having the tools they need to be successful at their jobs."

The community benefits from Suther Feeds' contributions to local Frankfort parks, pools, yearbook drives, and school donation drives. The company also contributes in the communities in the other states where it does business.

Seamless Data Access

To shore up the company's technology, Suther Feeds recently signed up for Data Center services from Networks Plus. Hiltgen says, "This service will allow their employees to access data from their multiple locations and work seamlessly no matter where they are. By placing their data in the 'cloud' at Networks Plus, they're also preventing data disasters by ensuring their data is kept in a storm-proof, properly heated/cooled, and fire-protected environment with our certified IT technicians just a step away if they're ever needed."

Johll comments, "The customer service from both Blue Valley and Networks Plus has been great. They're prompt, and we're fortunate that a representative lives in our town for when we have off-hours situations."



REMEMBERING MELVIN SUTHER

Melvin Suther founded Suther Feeds in 1963 with a vision to remove obstacles for customers. This vision enabled him to get a bank loan to start the company without a single customer. He continued being active in the business and delivered feed to customers until he was 80. Suther passed away on September 27, 2015, at the age of 85. Dr. Michael Johll, Chief Operating Officer at Suther Feeds, says, "We are who we are today because of his courage, tenacity, and commitment. I hope we can all think of the times we had together with him, celebrate his life, and be thankful our paths crossed."



NETWORKS PLUS' DATA CENTER SERVICES

Networks Plus' Data Center allows you secure 24/7/365 access to your important data without purchasing expensive new equipment. Our cloud data services are hosted on the highest quality virtualization servers, and our state-of-the-art data storage facility boasts exceptional security, fire suppression, climate control, power redundancy, and the ability to withstand natural disasters. Here are a few of the benefits of cloud data storage:

1. Virtual servers and applications can be spun up as needed, allowing growth that suits your company's needs.
2. You have access to the latest technology.
3. Uptime is guaranteed.
4. You have several business continuity and disaster recovery options.
5. Your data center is staffed by highly skilled, local technicians who care about you and your business.

Call 800-299-1704 to find out how Networks Plus' Data Center services can help your business increase efficiency and reduce costs!



Distracted by Wearing **Too Many Hats?**

It may be costing you time, passion, and energy

Are you being stretched to the limit, frequently distracted by tasks that keep you from performing your core competencies? You're not alone. The nation's 23 million small business owners lose more than 4 billion hours each year managing time-consuming — but crucial — business operations and administrative tasks. Nearly half (41 percent) said this lost time drains their passion and energy for growing the business.

“Business owners spend a lot of time conducting support work that, while critical, takes them away from working with their customers and growing their business,” says Kim Feil, Executive Vice President and Chief Marketing and Strategy Officer of Office Max. “They want to refocus their time building their businesses, and they want reliable partners who will address their specific needs.”

Common Distractions

What kinds of noncore tasks are pulling small business owners away from their primary functions? It varies depending on the type of business, but some of the most common are:

- Information technology (IT)
- Telecommunications
- Marketing
- Web development
- Social media
- Bookkeeping and accounting
- Taxes and payroll
- Human resources
- Administrative support

Small business owners may think they can do it all—wear many hats—but this approach can really stall sales and growth. In fact, business success depends in part on management’s ability to wade through the distractions and focus on critical business tasks. Every minute spent managing noncore tasks is a minute not focused on core competencies, which are defined as skills at which an individual is especially proficient, or a set of activities that a business performs better than other functions—whether more efficiently, at lower cost, or at higher quality.

Look Into Outsourcing

To get help with noncore tasks, you may want to turn to outsourcing. This strategy offers many valuable benefits, the first of which is freeing up time to focus on core competencies. Everyone can concentrate on what they do best, allowing your business to derive maximum benefit from each person’s talents.

Another benefit of outsourcing is that bringing in specialists often results in faster completion of projects. After all, which makes more sense—having you struggle through an IT challenge for days, or hiring an IT consultant who could complete the project in a few hours? In addition, outsourcing allows your business to access people with a high level of training, education, and experience in selected areas, which often pays off in the long run. For example, an accountant may find little-known tax deductions or a human resources contractor may be able to recommend ways to save on employee benefits. These specialists are also able to stay current with all the changes in their fields, which is difficult (if not impossible) for you to do as a stretched-too-thin small business owner.

At sba.gov, the U.S. Small Business Administration offers several suggestions for staffing a growing business, including outsourcing business functions. The site notes, “Whether you turn to a virtual assistant for help managing your calendar, voice mail, and perhaps some basic bookkeeping, or you need help with core business functions such as accounting, marketing or HR, outsourcing can be a low-overhead option that lets you concentrate more on business growth and less on day-to-day distractions.”



PAY ATTENTION TO THE WORSENING CULTURE OF DISTRACTION

“We are creating and encouraging a culture of distraction where we are increasingly disconnected from the people and events around us, and increasingly unable to engage in long-form thinking,” says Joe Kraus, two-time entrepreneur and current Google Ventures partner. “People now feel anxious when their brains are unstimulated.”

Kraus knows how to start and operate a successful business, particularly in the technology space. He’s in demand as a speaker and blogs at joekraus.com, where he wrote the following in 2012: “We are losing some very important things by doing this. We threaten the key ingredients behind creativity and insight by filling up all our ‘gap’ time with stimulation. And we inhibit real human connection when we prioritize our phones over the people right in front of us.”

The effect of all of this, Kraus argues, is that we’re increasingly distracted and less able to pay attention to anything for a reasonable length of time, and this distraction is a “worsening condition.” When you practice distraction (which is what multi-tasking really is), you’re training your brain to pay attention to distracting things. The more you train your brain to pay attention to distractions, the more you get distracted and the less able you are to focus.

“It’s shown not only that we’re dumber when we do this—an average of 10 IQ points dumber—but that we’re also 40 percent less efficient at whatever it is we’re doing,” writes Kraus.



STORE *your*
data **SAFELY**

Advantages of Outsourcing Your Data Needs

1. You can easily and efficiently scale your IT infrastructure to your changing business needs.
2. You have access to the latest technology without large capital expenses.
3. You have high availability and reliability due to our redundant network, power, and climate control systems.
4. You are a priority! Uptime is guaranteed through the Service Level Agreement (SLA).
5. You can trust the state-of-the-art security and fire suppression systems.
6. Your data center is staffed by highly skilled and certified technicians.
7. We're your total IT solutions advisors! Local people who understand and care about you and your business.

For more information, speak with your business consultant today.