

business solutions

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Stevenson Company, Inc. is Forging Powerful Partnerships

*Joe Pennington, President of Stevenson Company, Inc.,
answers questions during a recent ribbon-cutting ceremony.*



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business solutions

“Always focus on the front windshield and not the rear-view mirror.” This quote from former U.S. Secretary of State, Colin Powell, is a great reminder to keep our attention on what’s in front of us rather than on the past.

You’ll find inspiration for looking ahead in this issue of *Business Solutions*. It begins on page 3 with the **Four C’s of Creativity**, which offers tips on fostering creativity in the workplace to generate new ideas for the future.

Pages 4 and 5 feature a **Business Spotlight on Stevenson Company, Inc.** This innovative Topeka company makes spiral chutes for food product manufacturers and is active in the community, always looking ahead at new technology and new opportunities. Networks Plus recently helped Stevenson with the installation of a new CNC router and continues to function as its virtual IT department.

It’s important to **Grow With the Times to Grow Your Business**, as you’ll discover on page 6. Stay open to fresh ideas and encourage your employees to look for better and faster ways to do their jobs. On page 7, learn why **Businesses Improve Efficiency With Virtual PBX**. Could this cost-effective technology offered by Networks Plus help your business down the road?

As you focus on the front windshield, remember that Networks Plus is here to guide you in your technology planning. We’re in this journey together.

Sincerely,

Brian Thomason
General Manager/CEO
Blue Valley Network of Companies



Four C's of Creativity

How to encourage creative thinking at your company



When the going gets tough, the tough get creative. During the Great Depression, for example, several companies made huge bets that led to fame and fortune. DuPont told one of its star scientists to set aside basic research and pursue potentially profitable innovation—he came up with nylon. Douglas Aircraft debuted the DC-3, which within four years was carrying 90 percent of commercial airline passengers. And a group of competing inventors created television.

How many times have you said, “Why didn’t I think of that?” We’re often surprised by, or envious of, great ideas we see at trade shows or in industry publications. We admire those with seemingly innate abilities to create something from nothing but sometimes discount our own potential for creativity. Or we simply wait for breakthrough ideas to emerge spontaneously as the result of “eureka” moments.

While new ideas can turn up “out of the blue,” successful companies make a point of actively and consistently fostering creativity. To encourage the creative process at your workplace, keep in mind the four C's of creativity—Culture, Conditions, Context, and Collaboration.

Culture – Establish a business environment where creativity is solicited, rewarded, and celebrated. Let your employees know that creativity is valued. Ask for new ideas and creative solutions to problems. Reward employees when they come up with ways (big or small) to increase efficiency, improve service, or reduce costs. Finally, celebrate those ideas that make an impact and add value to your organization.

Conditions – Give your employees the resources they need to be creative. This can be as simple as allotting time during the business day for discussions, research, and brainstorming.

Context – Provide a clear target or specific goal. “Go be creative” is too vague to produce meaningful results. Instead, ask your employees to develop solutions for specific challenges. Give enough direction to point the way but resist being too directive, since that could inhibit creativity. Even “crazy” ideas frequently contain a bit of brilliance in them that can lead to practical applications.

Collaboration – Diverse groups tend to generate the most creative ideas since a range of expertise and viewpoints stimulates the kind of discussion that leads to innovation. To take advantage of this dynamic, establish teams comprised of people from different departments. You may also want to involve customers, vendors, and key stakeholders to bring outside perspectives to the process.



President Joe Pennington (left) at the CNC router with Stevenson employee, Chad Frickey

Stevenson Company, Inc.

Get a taste of what happens where chutes for snacks are made

When Joe Pennington, President of Stevenson Company, Inc., is asked what he does for a living, he replies, “I make Willy Wonka machines.” He could say he makes miniature children’s slides sized for lollipops, industrial nut crackers, and the world’s largest sugar bowls, but that would take more time.

Helping Products Move Gently

Located in Topeka, Stevenson is a sheet metal expert that makes stainless steel spiral chutes and other key components for manufacturers of food or fragile products. The company also provides industrial plant maintenance and support for manufacturers. Stevenson was founded in 1952 by Russell Stevenson and remains at its original location, but the facilities have expanded from a small tin shop into a much larger operation.

Pennington’s grandfather, Wiggle Pennington, worked for Russell Stevenson. His father, Jerry Pennington, bought the company in 1990.

Stevenson first expanded into the food service industry when it “took a crack” at building an egg-breaking machine. Its work in spiral chutes began when a customer with a snack food company was looking to reduce product breakage. Custom-engineered stainless steel spiral chutes are now one of the company’s top products, gently delivering fragile food products such as chips or crackers from the machine into the bag.

National and international food companies are customers of Stevenson. Pennington says, “If you’ve eaten potato chips in the United States, they’ve been down a chute made right here.”

New CNC Router Expands Options

In June 2017, Stevenson had a ribbon-cutting ceremony for the 2,500-square-foot expansion at 116 N.W. Norris Street—the first expansion since 1998. The space added was created to provide room for the operation of a new CNC router. (CNC stands for computer numeric control, which means the router cuts and carves designs from an attached computer.) This router cuts a special type of polyethylene material, which was recently approved for use in commercial food processes and will expand Stevenson's product options for the food manufacturers it serves.

Stevenson has been a Networks Plus customer for about 15 years. Pennington notes, "When we started thinking about this CNC router project, we sent a sketch to Networks Plus. Their team had the idea of making a mobile cart—a computer on wheels—and helped us set it up to make this new router convenient for any of our employees to use. There are no USB or electrical cords involved."



Joe Pennington (left)
with Stevenson accountant,
James Hilbert

Networks Plus Provides SafetyNET Assist

For many years, Networks Plus did work for Stevenson on an as-needed basis, eventually adding a scheduled monthly service check. Now the company subscribes to SafetyNET Assist from Networks Plus. SafetyNET Assist monitors and protects every desktop within a business; featuring 24/7 preventative and maintenance care, anti-virus, and patch updates.

Pennington says, "We've gone from asking Networks Plus to be reactive to having a system in place that's proactive. With Safety-

Networks Plus basically functions as our IT department. Stevenson is a 25-person company, and I want my employees to spend their time doing what they do best, which is producing stainless steel and plastic equipment for the food industry."

— JOE PENNINGTON, PRESIDENT, STEVENSON COMPANY, INC.

NET Assist, our system checks are done remotely and done more often—once an hour or once a day. This is less disruptive to our operation, and I don't have to make a list of things for Networks Plus to do or check on since everything happens automatically. Networks Plus is maximizing our uptime and addressing issues before they become big problems."

He adds, "Networks Plus basically functions as our IT department. Stevenson is a 25-person company, and I want my employees to spend their time doing what they do best, which is producing stainless steel and plastic equipment for the food industry. It makes sense to have Networks Plus handle the IT issues. We have a real partnership with Networks Plus. It feels like they're on our staff. When I call Networks Plus, they're here."

Focused on Food, Committed to Community

What's ahead for Stevenson? Pennington replies, "We'll continue to transition from doing sheet metal work of all kinds into focusing solely on the food market. Our specialty will be producing food-safe stainless steel spiral chutes and other components for companies around the world. I'm proud that Stevenson is in the business of making things, and I'm proud to be able to give back to the Topeka community." Examples of Stevenson's work in the community include creating the copper roof on the Topeka Capitol and a partnership with the Evel Knievel Museum.



Grow With the Times to Grow Your Business

To stay relevant and successful, branch out and explore new opportunities



It's impressive to be a longstanding business with deep roots in the community. Keep in mind, however, that holding on too tightly to traditions from the past may be hurting your business in the present. Why? Because blindly following tradition causes us to turn off our brains and can get in the way of critical thinking, imagination, and innovation.

Think about these questions: Do you handle tasks a certain way simply because that's the way you've always done them? Are you using outdated computer or communications technology? Do you still have the same marketing materials, merchandising displays, or products that you had five years ago?

To foster growth, stay open to fresh ideas and encourage your employees to look for better and faster ways to do their jobs and serve your customers. Many resources are readily available which can help plant the seeds for new opportunities. For example, join a local business or community group to hear inspiring speakers and network with new people. Expand your knowledge by studying the success stories of businesses in other industries. Browse around Pinterest for images that may spark a more creative tactic for items such as your office interior, product packaging, or advertising.

To grow your business, it's important to take advantage of today's powerful and cost-efficient options in communications services. For details on the solutions offered by Networks Plus, call 800.299.1704.

The U.S. Small Business Administration also offers a variety of growth tips at www.sba.gov, including:

- **Offer your business as a franchise or business opportunity.** Franchising your business will allow for growth without requiring you to manage the new location. This will help to maximize the time you spend improving your business in other ways, too.
- **License your product.** This can be an effective, low-cost growth medium, particularly if you have a service product or branded product. Licensing also minimizes your risk and is low cost in comparison to the price of starting your own company to produce and sell your brand or product.
- **Form an alliance.** Partnering with a similar type of business can be a powerful way to expand quickly.
- **Diversify.** Diversifying is an excellent strategy for growth because it allows you to have multiple streams of income that can often fill seasonal voids. Some of the most common ways to diversify are to sell complementary products or services, teach adult education or other classes, and become a paid speaker or columnist.
- **Target other markets.** Your current market may be serving you well, but are there others that could use your products?

Businesses Improve Efficiency with **Virtual PBX**

VoIP technology can reduce total cost of ownership and increase convenience



Voice-over-Internet Protocol (VoIP) technology has been available for a number of years but some companies were initially resistant to using it. Their hesitation often stemmed from the perception that VoIP offered poor sound quality and availability could be affected if the company's internet service went down.

In actuality, today's Virtual PBX systems using VoIP technology offers sound quality that's clearer than traditional telephone systems. Should the internet connection be interrupted, many telecommunications providers allow business customers to set up disaster recovery routing using a preset cell phone or landline number.

Additional benefits include:

- Virtual PBX phone systems offer more enhanced features and functionality than traditional phone systems. For example, they can provide a voicemail to email feature so users can get voicemail messages via email.
- Businesses experience a reduced total cost of ownership with Virtual PBX since it eliminates the need to house and manage large on-site equipment. There are low upfront costs and affordable monthly fees.

- Virtual PBX is a cloud-based phone system. From a simple and intuitive web interface, users manage their own features as well as moves, adds, and changes. This greatly reduces the need for service calls.
- Virtual PBX enables businesses to take advantage of new features and technologies as they come available with automatic upgrades included.
- Businesses of all sizes can afford to access the advanced call routing functionality typically available only with high-end, enterprise-level solutions. Virtual PBX's flexible infrastructure can grow as a business grows.
- Remote users have the opportunity to work on the road with all the mobility feature functionality of working in the office. Downloadable apps allow integration of smartphones, laptops, and tablets.

Whether you have a small office with only a few phones or run a large business with multiple sites, Networks Plus offers Virtual PBX solutions to meet your needs. To learn more, call a Networks Plus Business Consultant at 800.299.1704.



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INTELLIGENT, CUSTOMER FRIENDLY
& AFFORDABLE SOLUTION IN THE
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"Networks Plus has been reliable & responsive whenever we have needed them; including being ready to provide support when we have had issues over the weekend. They have done a great job of recognizing our preferred approach to handling data backups and have come up with affordable solutions that meet our objectives. Networks Plus has been the most reliable, intelligent, customer-friendly and affordable solution with whom we have partnered in our market."

John Woodward

Kid Stuff Marketing, Inc.



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