



Commerce Casino Chooses Not to Gamble with WLAN

Commerce Casino, located in Commerce, California, just a few miles from the glitz of Hollywood, is one of the West Coast's premier card rooms. With a clientele that can run the gamut from a postal worker, to a Sales Director, to a Hollywood movie star, all at the same table, the Casino has capitalized on an explosion in interest in games such as No Limit Hold 'Em, 7-Card Stud, Low-Ball, and Pai Gow Poker, to become a world-recognized venue for high-stakes, high-profile gaming.



But when Commerce decided to upgrade their phone system and deploy wireless LAN (WLAN) at the same time, taking risks was the last thing they had in mind. The solution would play a crucial role in supporting highly mobile, 24x7 Casino operations, so downtime was not an option. It also had to be flexible enough to implement RFID and data applications. When the chips were down, Commerce put their money on the Extricom WLAN.

The Technological Edge

Casinos and gaming establishments occupy a highly complex, and highly profitable, niche in the hospitality industry. Many of the business drivers are the same: casinos depend on serving large volumes of customers and on attracting return business, so they are anxious to project a welcoming image and make sure their clientele enjoys the "user experience."

At the same time, the casino floor is a tightly controlled environment where managers must monitor what is happening at every table. Real-time communication and data flows are key to ensuring fundamental business procedures are closely followed and strict legal guidelines are always complied with.

In addition, RFID technology has greatly increased the ability of casinos to track and assess consumer behavior. This allows management to determine what's popular and what's not, then quickly adjust their marketing strategies. In the highly competitive gaming industry, real-time information provides a critical edge to stay ahead of the competition.

Keeping Tabs

Traditionally, keeping tabs on the casino floor has been a labor-intensive, manual process, managed by pit bosses and a network of supervisors. To some degree, the process remains the same, but the application of mobile technology has allowed casino management to do more with less, realizing important cost-savings.

This was precisely what Ralph Wong, Commerce Casino's Chief Administrative Officer, was looking for when he decided to replace the company's obsolete telecommunications system. Upgrading the existing system would be too expensive, so he settled on a more cost-effective SpectraLink VoWLAN phone solution from Polycom. The biggest challenge, however, was making sure that the underlying WLAN infrastructure would flawlessly support his choice and meet a range of additional business requirements.

"It's a two-step process: you need to find the right phone but you also need the right WLAN infrastructure to support it," stated Wong. "For our managers, wherever they are on the floor is where their office is. It's critical that our solution give them the ability to roam freely while still being able to take live calls, which is key to good customer service."

Commerce Casino's complex encompasses 238,000 square feet and the WLAN had to provide coverage everywhere on the premises as well as capacity for areas where wireless clients might congregate. At the same time, the solution had to be robust enough to deal with the interference-prone environment of the pit floor, where a variety of wireless devices and signal-producing equipment would be jostling for the same airspace.

One Tough Customer

Most WLANs on the market would be challenged to meet these requirements. Traditional cell-based solutions are optimized



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Project Scope

Implement comprehensive WLAN to enable management operations throughout 238,000 square foot casino, supporting voice, data, and RFID

Solution

- Mix of EXSW-800 and EXSW-2400 switches and EXRP-20 access points

Results

- System deployed without interruption to Casino operations
- Future-proofed infrastructure capable of supporting VoWLAN phone system, as well as planned RFID rewards program running in parallel over separate channel blanket

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Wireless
On the Move

for coverage or capacity, but not both. Even more important, the frequent handoffs experienced by users as they pass from AP to AP are very problematic for supporting mobile voice communications.

In addition, cell-based solutions generally require repeated re-tuning to address changing operating environments. This makes them a poor choice for dynamic settings which are also prone to external sources of RF interference. So Wong looked to an experienced solution provider, Teldata, to help him find the right technology.

The Architecture of Choice

Teldata proposed using the Extricom WLAN, a system they had already deployed in other tough environments, for both voice and data applications. What makes the Extricom WLAN the logical choice for mobile environments is the Channel Blanket™, a highly flexible architecture in which every access point (AP) in the system transmits on the same channels, and the aggregate signal from all APs creates a highly resilient, blanket-like Wi-Fi network.

Unique to the Extricom network, VoWLAN phones associate directly to the switch rather than any individual AP. The result is seamless mobility and handoff-free movement between all APs forming the coverage area.

“Picture the Channel Blanket like a bubble covering your facility,” explained Tim Wagner, the wireless consultant working on the project. “The topology allows you to deploy APs anywhere, so if there’s a hole in the bubble you just put in another AP to plug it. Likewise, you can place them in any density to ensure uplink diversity, which goes a long way towards drowning out RF interference from other wireless devices.”

The Deployment is in the Details

But it’s not just the big picture that makes Extricom such an a clear choice. Small but critical details are key value-adds, according to Wagner: “Extricom provides a level of QoS that no other solution can come close to, making VoWLAN deployments really simple. If you think of the system as if it were just one big AP with the coverage of twenty-four APs, the distinction is immediately apparent. And the level of support we got from their Sales Engineers was phenomenal.”

With Wong’s blessing, Teldata went ahead with the deployment, maneuvering around the ongoing casino operations without interrupting a single hand of cards. The actual deployment

itself took the team about two working days, and simply consisted of walking the floor to familiarize themselves with the site; loading sitemaps to Extricom’s deployment tool; and determining the best AP placement based solely on signal propagation.

There was none of the channelization, IP networking, or coverage overlap and interference analysis required by all other solutions. The only remaining steps were to mount the APs, configure the switch in a single event, and perform some basic checks to ensure coverage.

The Future of Guest Rewards

Since the implementation, the system has worked impeccably, and Commerce Casino’s managers are now able to remain on the floor from shift start to finish, responding to concerns instantly. And that’s just the start: “We selected the Extricom system because it’s future-proof, and can pretty much support whatever we choose to run on it,” asserts Wong.

The next application that the Extricom WLAN will enable is in the planning/research stages: a cutting-edge Guest Rewards card that can leverage wireless RFID technology, integrated with a CRM system, to give Commerce Casino’s management insights into player habits and preferences. Whatever RFID application is deployed will be able to benefit from the Channel Blanket architecture by running in parallel with the VoWLAN phone system, on its own dedicated channel throughout, without competing for the same bandwidth.

A Simple Assessment

In the final analysis, Commerce Casino’s assessment of the Extricom WLAN was simple and results-focused, just like any other aspect of its business operations. It boiled down to a couple of questions: did it save them money and do what it was meant to do?

“I’d have to say the answer was yes on both,” says Wong. “In combination with the Spectralink wireless telephones, we realized substantial savings over other alternatives, and we will achieve considerable operational efficiencies, both now and going forward.”