First Bank pairs new digital offerings with highly personal service to maintain a competitive edge

Forward-thinking digital approach contributes to assets rising $3.2 billion in just 30 months

Based in Southern Pines, North Carolina, First Bank is a community bank with more than 100 branch locations in the Carolinas. Since 1935, a deep commitment to its clients' best interests has kept the bank growing. Today, with more than 1,000 employees and $6.1 billion in assets, First Bank is one of North Carolina's largest financial institutions.

Maintaining this momentum challenges Chief Operating Officer Rex Scott to find new ways to deliver services and a highly personal experience to more than 300,000 clients.

> *"We would not have had the success we've had thus far without the Spectrum Enterprise Ethernet service. The infrastructure has been a key to our success."*

— Rex Scott

Challenges
Network downtime threatened First Bank's day-to-day operations and client experience

In 2015, First Bank's telecom provider was struggling to meet service-level agreement (SLA) commitments and provide the level of responsiveness the bank required. "Support was something that we had to chase," says Scott.

Network outages slowed internal operations at branches and exposed clients to a poor experience with the bank's online and mobile services. "Connectivity is critical for everything we do," adds Scott. "It's not like the old days. We're dependent on the digital world now." When the network goes down, "we can't just go back to paper," he says.

Existing infrastructure could not cost-effectively scale to support acquisitions and new digital services

Scaling the bank's MPLS network to deliver more bandwidth and redundancy involved high costs and long lead times. This hampered efforts to integrate acquisitions and efficiently deliver new services. T1 connections at most of the bank's locations meant it could take weeks to add bandwidth to deploy a new digital product. Adding voice capacity at the branches proved just as time-consuming.

Rex Scott, COO, First Bank. Client since 2016.

Client profile

FIRST BANK

Company
First Bank

Industry
Financial

Services
Ethernet
Fiber Internet Access
SIP Trunking

Spectrum
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The bank also had several different premises-based phone solutions across its 118 locations. This fragmented system involved multiple vendors and could not easily scale to service new locations. Furthermore, the bank's three call centers were using a traditional, antiquated phone system that lacked the redundancy required to continue servicing clients in the event of an outage.

Scott didn't have the time or the budget to reconfigure the IT architecture every time he wanted to scale up connectivity, introduce a new product, integrate a newly acquired bank or deploy new client-service tools for the bank's 1,000-plus employees.

Technology advances and rising client expectations heightened competitive pressures

On the business side, First Bank deftly navigated the challenges presented by the recession in the late 2000s and the tough regulatory climate that followed. It avoided losses and subsequent underinvestment in IT that resulted in many other banks being absorbed or bought out.

Post-recession advances in technology combined with rising client expectations for "anytime, anywhere" access to information and services presented new challenges, including heightened competitive pressures. To stay ahead of the competition, First Bank needed a reliable and agile digital infrastructure that would support the rapid introduction of client services designed for convenience, speed and round-the-clock access. The bank needed a partner that "will work with us not just on today's products, but with what we're going to be adding — even when we don't yet know what those products are," says Scott.

The bank will be able to serve its clients better, thanks to a fast fiber network that supports new services such as Hosted Voice, part of the Unified Communications solution from Spectrum Enterprise.

Solutions
Reliable network operations and solid account support

First Bank's experience during the sales process played a big part in its decision to choose Spectrum Enterprise.

"Spectrum Enterprise brought the entire team onsite," Scott says. "I'm not just talking about salespeople. They brought engineers who talked to our network folks. They spoke the same language and we were impressed at how well they understood our challenges and offered ideas for meeting those challenges."

Given the downtime First Bank experienced with its original provider, Scott needed a reliable, high-performance network. He also needed a network that could scale to support new hardware or IP-based software applications and the rapid delivery of new client services.

The Spectrum Enterprise network fit the bill, providing the reliability of fiber combined with the ability to easily scale bandwidth to 10 Gbps.

First Bank has maximized network uptime through the redundancy provided by a secure Ethernet connection that links all of the bank's locations. Any problems that do arise are addressed rapidly — based on an SLA that commits to a four-hour mean time to restore service. Quick responsiveness, along with Ethernet's any-to-any connectivity, provides cost-effective and streamlined operations and data access across all branches.

The bank also deployed a SIP Trunking service for its call centers. This service, provided via the Spectrum Enterprise fiber network, provides failover capabilities to ensure client calls don't go unanswered if one of the centers experiences an outage.

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The flexibility and scalability of the bank's infrastructure has enabled the bank to grow to more than 100 branches while maintaining the quality of service its clients expect.

Competitive advantage aided by a fast digital infrastructure

First Bank now relies upon the faster digital transaction times for clients provided by the Ethernet service and Fiber Internet Access from Spectrum Enterprise. These services ensure immediate access to data, with connectivity speeds among the bank's locations ranging from 5 Mbps to 40 Gbps.

First Bank has also configured its infrastructure to accelerate deployment of new digital services. "Whether it's remotely with a customer using our mobile products, or internally — in our branches themselves — our customers are dependent on the digital world now, and our bank is now capable of meeting and exceeding our customers' demands," states Scott.

Results
The bank operates more efficiently and delivers a better client experience

"We've seen a marked improvement in how well our network SLAs are being met," Scott says. The network's reliability and speed enhance the client experience by supporting process improvements like teller capture. "Instead of waiting to batch together hundreds or thousands of transactions," Scott explains, "each transaction now goes through our Ethernet platform where it's posted immediately. Transactions today are so much faster than they had been."

Scott sees bottom-line value in streamlining everything from product updates and deployments to transaction processing now that he has a high-bandwidth, low-latency network. His infrastructure management costs are also markedly less.

An additional benefit is the responsiveness of the Spectrum Enterprise account team. The team has a deep understanding and appreciation for the challenges the bank faces, and is an essential part of quickly turning up new locations and services.

Adding new capabilities and acquisitions is now turnkey

First Bank can continue to adapt to new ways of banking and doing business for years to come, thanks to the flexibility and scalability of the infrastructure in place today.

Integrating newly acquired banks is now a fast and streamlined process. "During just two and a half years," Scott says, "First Bank did a branch exchange, acquired two banks and became a $6.1 billion bank. We grew to over a hundred branches. None of that was on the table when we first talked with Spectrum Enterprise, yet there's not been a hitch along the way."

First Bank is also leveraging its new infrastructure to add solutions that improve efficiency and reduce costs. For example, it is using the same fiber infrastructure that handles its data to implement Unified Communications as its corporate voice solution.

Scott expects to see immediate ROI. "Hosted Voice will enable us to do things that we weren't able to do before. It also basically eliminates telephone toll charges. The routing that we'll have with the feature functions at the branch level should free us up and make our locations more efficient."

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"The challenge now is that our success with technology has changed our relationship with our customers: They expect innovation from us and they require us to be there 24/7/365 for them. The only way we're going to survive in this new environment is with the right digital infrastructure."

— **Rex Scott**

First Bank can offer outstanding personal service and fast transactions, thanks to the speed of its new digital infrastructure.

The bank is retaining a competitive edge in an evolving industry

Scott acknowledges that both technology and the banking industry are evolving so rapidly that he doesn't know everything his network will need to do in the months and years to come. "The good news," Scott says, "is that as we get more opportunities. One of the things we don't have to worry about is the Spectrum Enterprise piece of it. We know they're going to be there at the table when we need them, and do what we need them to do."

Scott believes Ethernet will continue to play a major role in the bank's success. So will his Spectrum Enterprise account team.

Scott values the team's expertise in helping him use today's infrastructure to prepare for tomorrow's challenges — from economic to cybersecurity to regulatory to the rapid acceleration of technology (including artificial intelligence).

"Despite all that's ahead," he says, "the flexibility of the digital infrastructure we have in place keeps me optimistic about the future of the bank."

About Spectrum Enterprise

Spectrum Enterprise, a part of Charter Communications, is a national provider of scalable, fiber-based technology solutions serving many of America's largest businesses and communications service providers. The broad Spectrum Enterprise portfolio includes networking and managed services solutions, including Internet access, Ethernet and Managed Network Services, Voice and TV solutions, Managed Application, Cloud Infrastructure and Managed Hosting Services. Our team of experts works closely with clients to achieve greater business success by providing solutions designed to meet their evolving needs. For more information, visit enterprise.spectrum.com.

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