

# Comet

Business



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

Company: ntlCustomer: CometSubmitted by: Nelson Bostock

CommunicationsThe pace of technological innovation is increasingly affecting the electrical retail sector. Consumer products themselves are becoming more complex of course, but the struggle to stay competitive - in terms of both price and customer service - is demanding the adoption of the very latest network-based commercial practices. The key players facing up to those challenges in the UK electrical retail market can be counted on one hand. And Comet is undoubtedly one of them.

In 1998 Comet - in capturing a large share of the high technology consumer electronics, personal computer and domestic appliances market - recognised that it needed to adopt a more forward-looking strategy for its IT infrastructure. It required a major network upgrade that, amongst other things, would support applications that could track stock delivery, ensure customer orders were processed rapidly and could also provide a stable intranet to improve data sharing. This was the position before ntl delivered Comet a major network upgrade - a project worth in excess of £1 million in its first year and £3.5 million over five years. Marc Tordoff, network analyst at Comet, taking up the story said: " We needed expertise and a track record in the management of large-scale network integration projects. That's why we turned to ntl as a project partner that would understand the requirement and have the resource to deliver their promises.

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## **AN INTEGRATED INFRASTRUCTURE**

Comet's business has grown rapidly, and with that expansion has come a heavier reliance on the network needed to share data between the company's headquarters in Rickmansworth, large distribution depots, its home delivery platforms and its call centres. In 1998, Comet was struggling with a legacy IT infrastructure that was piecemeal and unprepared for Year 2000 compliance. Previous tactical investment, whilst offering Comet the opportunity to push into profitable sectors, has also meant that the network consisted of non-integrated platforms. Marc Tordoff recalls: " We were becoming involved with larger application projects that relied upon a greater degree of resilience and integration from the network. The existing network infrastructure then would not have been able to cope with the demands.

" In addition, that network made Comet slow in reacting to aggressive pricing competition in the high street from independents and department stores. The potential for e-commerce was also a major consideration. Understanding the possibilities in this area meant that it had to put in place a platform that would scale to support such a new role.

## **INDEPENDENT EXPERTS**

The solution proposed by ntl encompassed a strategic appraisal of Comet's infrastructure, a risk-managed network migration, end-to-end support and provision of all hardware, and on-going support. Marc Tordoff says: " One of the key factors that persuaded us to select ntl was the confidence factor.

A great track record in retail and in this type of large rollout implementation were fundamental to us in de-risking the project." This would provide the

wide area bandwidth needed to connect the Comet offices UK wide – the essential objective being to provide an infrastructure that could deliver 10Mbps to the desktop of each of Comet’s 2, 500 users across 32 sites. The three main sites in Rickmansworth, Hull and Leeds – together with the call centres in Clevedon and Corby – were provided with Cisco Systems solutions for the wide area network and 3Com solutions in the local area network. ntl was also responsible for the design and installation of a Category 5 standard structured cabling system for a number of Comet locations.

ntl proved early on that, although allied to a number of network vendors, it was able to maintain vendor independence and provide the best solution to suit Comet’s existing infrastructure and future needs. Marc Tordoff agrees: ntl provided us with the most apt solution, a multi-vendor solution encompassing the best of breed technologies from Cisco and 3Com.”

## **RESILIENCE IMPERATIVE**

The Rickmansworth Head Office site houses the main network server farm, supporting some 350 users who all receive switched 10Mbps to NT workstations. An SMDS ‘ cloud’ was provided, allowing bandwidth to be expanded virtually on demand should the company require it. The Cisco routers in the WAN provide the link to the SMDS cloud via high-speed serial interface connections at speeds from 192kbps up to 4Mbps. At the core of the LANs are 3Com CoreBuilder 3500 multi-function switches, and 3Com Layer 3 switching technology provides all the functionality of a Layer 2 LAN switch with the Layer 3 filtering and security features of a router.

In the next tier, 3Com SuperStack II Switch 1000 products provide 10/100Mbps Fast Ethernet to all user communities. The infrastructure provides Comet with a fully resilient collapsed backbone topology with no single point of failure. The process critical nature of the intranet made this resilience an imperative. ntl's careful project planning managed as much risk out of the new implementation as possible. The network migration strategy allowed a period when the old infrastructure would run in parallel with the new. The changeover did not take place until ntl was happy that the new system was entirely stable.

Two HP OpenView network management stations at the network operations centre in Stoke on Trent are linked direct into Comet's headquarters via a separate KiloStream link. The benefit of this approach for Comet is total peace of mind. A four hour or 'four hour plus one' break-fix service level agreement means that a fault is resolved either within four hours if the problem is at the router end, or in an extra hour if the problem is located in one of the LANs. Most faults are anticipated and corrected before Comet is even aware that there might have been a problem. ntl has also placed a full-time onsite engineer at Comet's headquarters, familiar with the network architecture and able to identify potential problems before they escalate to seriously impact on network or application performance.

The engineer also provides immediate detailed advice to help Comet improve its network operation. Although the service level agreement provides nine-to-five cover, Comet has found that in practice, the engineer will resolve faults at any time.

## **FIT FOR THE FUTURE**

The business advantages of the ntl approach to delivering and now supporting the network have been enormous for Comet. The new network has speeded up the delivery process and so improved the service to the customer in greatly reduced order processing turn-around. Marc Tordoff explains: " Our customers now enjoy a much faster response time in the delivery of their goods, because our network can cope with the demands of increasing mail order trade, for example.

The bandwidth is three times what we had before at 95% of our sites, enabling us to deliver high levels of network availability and the flexibility to meet the network requirements of a wide range of applications." Comet no longer has the direct responsibility of keeping up with the latest developments to support the network as it grows. In Marc's words, this means that: "...Comet has seen a big reduction in its network support costs, and we have also seen a reduction in network management costs. ntl and their partners take responsibility for the day-to-day running of the infrastructure away from our IT department, freeing them up to focus on strategic issues such as growing e-commerce opportunities." The flexibility of the new infrastructure delivers real benefits to individual retail outlets, because local pricing and stock flow are put on the intranet, allowing Comet to monitor which outlets sell which products most successfully, and where locally based competition is attempting to better Comet's pricing. This information is used to deliver a targeted sales strategy to each outlet. comet now has an infrastructure fit for certain growth into the 21st century. The Year 2000 compliance issue has been addressed and the company has a

fully resilient, integrated and completely scalable infrastructure to run the new applications required for future expansion. Marc Tordoff concludes: “ ntl are a very competent network service provider, both technically and in the way they project manage and support their customers.” During the selection process I attended a presentation where they explained in detail some of the projects that they had undertaken for similar large organisations. That convinced me that they would be the right people to meet our requirements.” In Comet’s experience to date ntl’s expertise has delivered real business benefit - dramatically improving the network’s ability to support the business and making real savings in management costs.”