

## CABLE & TELECOM

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# THE INDEPENDENTS: Execulink serves customers any way it can

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WOODSTOCK, Ont. – Be it fibre, coaxial, wireless, or copper – on their own networks, or as a wholesale provider – Execulink will serve customers by any means possible.

That's the mantra which has been passed down through four generations of Stevens family members who have run the company or its predecessors. "We service every client category," said CEO Ian Stevens, in an interview with Cartt.ca at the company's Woodstock, Ont. headquarters. "You drive down a road and you go from a farmer to somebody who's living in a small community for a lifestyle, to a retired person, to a young family – and we don't always see that in rural areas, but in the urban areas we service them with our resale product – we're attracting people of every demographic."



Like many independent telecom operators, Execulink's history begins more than a century ago, in 1904 in Burgessville, Ontario where a Dr. Service first launched telephone by connecting his office to the local general store. Execulink still owns and operates the fibre and copper telecom network in that exchange just south of Woodstock, along with the Norwich, Thedford and Port Franks exchanges – as well as one in part of Woodstock.

It also owns some small co-axial cable networks purchased from the former Regional Cablesystems back in 1993 in places like Parkhill, Forest, Ilderton, Ailsa Craig and Watford. The company is also a third party access Internet provider and offers wireless services – both mobile (*with some limited handsets, but they'd prefer you brought your own to their no contract service*) and fixed wireless to bring broadband to fill the gaps where there is no network. They even have a data centre.

The Stevens-family owned and operated carrier now boasts over 50,000 customers, some of whom are spread far and wide – but the company's focus is concentrated in Southwestern Ontario, "in the 519" said Keith Stevens, Ian's father, the former CEO and current chairman of the board (*Pictured above, they're both engineers, too*).

While its customers run the demographic gamut, Ian Stevens says Execulink essentially serves two groups. “We’ve got a great resale customer base in Woodstock, and the Londons, and Kitcheners of the world and it’s a big part of our business (*he also notes he’s a big fan of the CRTC’s recent wholesale wireline decisions*), but our roots are out in small town, farming Ontario; towns where there might be 1,000 homes, 2,000 homes,” or less. That sounds pretty good, but when these households are spread out over hundreds of square kilometres, it gets far trickier and much more expensive for the SILEC to serve them than it takes Rogers to serve the same number of households in Toronto, but in a complex of four condo towers, for example.

*“They’re looking for big city services in rural Canada... they desperately want it.” – Ian Stevens, Execulink*

“We’ve got a low-density challenge in providing services that people are looking for,” added CEO Stevens. “They’re looking for big city services in rural Canada... they desperately want it. You talk to the customers, you talk to the local politicians, and they want those big city services.”

In Southwestern Ontario, for example, most of the population is clustered in Kitchener-Waterloo, London, Windsor and some other mid-size to small cities like Stratford, Chatham and Sarnia, so some may not think of the region as having a density issue. However, adds Keith Stevens: “If somebody lives 10 kilometres outside of Tilbury, for example, they might as well be in the Northwest Territories... and our big challenge is making sure that people in Ottawa understand that.”

Thankfully for Execulink and some other companies, the various levels of government do understand and over the years have offered cash to help get broadband into communities where it wouldn’t otherwise be affordable. For example, thanks to the former Conservative government’s Connecting Canadians program, the company recently **fibred Melrose**, Ont. (a small community barely outside of London) which had been served only by a fixed wireless network which was overmatched for what people need. It then also received grants to build fibre to five other small developments (*pictured is their fibre install team*).

“We never would have had a business case to do all six of those without a Connecting Canadians grant, but having done it... the consumers are pretty happy. We do some town halls... and they’re ecstatic,” says Ian Stevens.

It’s not simple, however, running a variety of networks providing a variety of services, based on what makes sense economically in each region, or slices of a region. While one neighbourhood or small town might have fibre, the next one over, in the same county, might only be large enough for a DSL service, which is slower, and another might only be possible to serve with fixed wireless, likely slower still – and consumers don’t understand the limitations.

“We can’t just go to Oxford (County), for instance, and say, we have this service everywhere in Oxford and anybody that lives here can get it. We just can’t do that in any particular geography, because there’s always limitations to our plant,” says Stevens. “It makes it hard to be able to say, ‘Oxford’s our community, we’ve got it covered’. Then go on to the next one and say, ‘yep, this is our community’. It’s tough. It’s tough to get the



message across.”

Even so, though, the CEO says its customers like Execulink because of the company’s focus on customer service and its grassroots marketing. Yes, for some, Execulink is the only option in their region “but we try to behave like the customer has a choice,” explains the CEO. “Our people connect really well with our clients and that’s how we try and do it, for us, it’s about that touch. They will have a choice one day, and we want them to continue to buy from us.”

And when it comes to marketing the business, that local touch is front and centre and focused on its 140 employees. “We really want to be involved in the communities, so all of our employees have sponsorship dollars so that if they volunteer within their community, we’ll give them sponsorship dollars for the organization they’re volunteering with because we want them to be integrated as Execulink within the community they live in... that adds to our impact within the community.”

*“We’re now trying to serve some of the smaller towns that have been forgotten by Bell.” – Stevens*

While the Stevens family says it plows profits right back into its networks and is hopeful new programs **like SWIFT** will help out, too, it knows that investments in fibre for the regions in which it's pushing hardest may take a decade to pay off – but they see it as an opportunity because they know what works.

“We're now trying to serve some of the smaller towns that have been forgotten by Bell, where they just don't bother serving them... we're trying to provide service,” adds Stevens who also explained that tech-driven farmers who need constant high speed connectivity, growing small to medium sized businesses and modern families choosing the small town life, but within driving distance of a larger centre, are pushing broadband



demand hard. Anecdotally, he's heard from real estate agents who say homes in rural regions which have access to fibre sell for more than those which don't – meaning there are paths to profit out here.

“The great thing about rural Canada is there's nobody doing it... so there's a lot of opportunity. I guess the downside is my concern as a citizen that the ubiquity of the availability is going to take a long time to happen.”