

# **Success Stories from Rural Nebraska**

## **Small Telecom Company Promotes Entrepreneurism, Helps Communities Grow**

In the Nebraska Sandhills where cattle far outnumber people and gently rolling grassy dunes paint the landscape, one telecommunications company brings not only high-tech solutions but also a positive message to fight economic downturns.

Consolidated, a family-owned firm serving 23 communities throughout 8,500 square miles in west central Nebraska, provides the region with a full range of communications products. Those include telephone, cable television, e-mail and high-speed Internet connectivity. The company has invested nearly 15.5 million dollars in local infrastructures over the last 10 years.

The latest boost to area businesses is a public relations campaign. Consolidated identified successful entrepreneurs in the Sandhills, and working with an Omaha advertising agency, they built short profiles of each business and sent them as press releases to local and state papers.

“The problem was that the only stories being told about these communities were negative,” said Brian Thompson, Economic Development Project leader for Consolidated. “We felt that there were some great stories out there that were not getting told.”

Stories, such as rancher-turned-hatter in Arthur; the Glidden Sandhills Hotel, offering canoe trips and bird-watching; a two-story barn guesthouse called Doc’s Hideout; successful banking ventures in tiny Maywood; Ole’s Prairie Ridge hunting outfitters and lodge in Paxton; and a livestock equipment company that employs 18 people in a town of 200.

The first of the articles ran in early January 2003, primarily in area weekly papers. Most dailies didn’t run the stories, but the largest paper in the state did their own feature on one entrepreneur introduced to them by Consolidated. And Nebraska Congressman Tom Osbourne mentioned success stories highlighted by Consolidated in his weekly reports.

“The business owners were extremely happy with the pieces we put together,” Thompson said. “As a company, we realize the importance of helping to develop the local economies we are a part of, and have committed our time and resources to do just that. To that end, we felt it necessary to recognize hard-working entrepreneurs.”

Consolidated’s economic development strategies, which have gone beyond public relations pieces, serve to boost economies in their service region. What’s in it for them? A better business atmosphere leads to long-term telecommunication customers.

The company’s first goal was to set up a high quality telecommunications network. Their infrastructure helps rank Nebraska near the top of all states when it comes to percentage of homes and schools with access to the Internet.

“Seventy-five percent of our customers can receive high-speed Internet access.” Thompson said.

But beyond laying wires and fiber optics, Consolidated saw the need to bring technical expertise to rural communities to help residents and existing business owners. Consolidated partnered with the Center for Rural Entrepreneurship, the Nebraska Rural Development Commission, the Nebraska Community Foundation and others to assist with business planning and community economic development.

One of the most promising projects, developed by the Center for Rural Entrepreneurship, is the Hometown Competitiveness Model. The idea is to promote entrepreneurship, wealth retention and leadership in small communities, as well as work to convince young people not to flee their hometowns.

“Research tells us that the youth of these rural areas are leaving at an alarming rate,” Thompson said. “An important part of this model will give a framework to finding entrepreneurs and partnering them with young people interested in growing a business.”

The telecommunications industry as a whole may not be known for its economic development work, but in rural areas experiencing population decline and agricultural losses, it’s part of good business.

“We have a big bet on these communities,” said Thompson, whose grandfather started Consolidated in 1947. “And we think they can succeed.”

\*\* The following six press releases were those sent out by Consolidated. For more information, contact Brian Thompson at 402-489-2728 or [briant@nebnet.net](mailto:briant@nebnet.net)