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Granite overcomes installation challenges in lighting 100 shopping malls with fiber-based Grid solution

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Granite Telecommunications may have secured 100 shopping center customer wins for its Granite Grid offering, but the service provider saw a number of challenging installation scenarios.

Granite Grid is a fiber-based networking solution that provides a set of dedicated, scalable voice and data services for multi-tenant buildings such as shopping malls, hospitals, university campuses and others.

Since the product was launched earlier this year, Granite Grid has been implemented in a number of the largest mall operators in the United States, including Simon Property Group, General Growth Properties, Macerich and Taubman.

Rob Norton, VP of advanced data solutions for Granite Telecommunications, told *FierceInstaller* that the issues, which depend on the age of a particular location, emerge during a site survey.

"We'll send out a site engineer because pathways in malls can be challenging since some of these buildings are older than others and a lot of them have antiquated gear running through it that no one knows what it is being utilized for today," Norton said. "There's no rip-and-replace going on because you never know the functionality of what's in there and that's what the mall owners are trying to get their hands around."

Since a lot of older malls have been served by the local incumbent telco, Granite will find wiring closets where switches and wiring are not labeled. This makes it challenging to understand what is in or not in operation.

"If you think about how old some of these properties are, for years the incumbent has had free rein to come and go as they please, so it's a vast array of gear, wires and patch panels that no one knows the functionality of," Norton said. "It's not tagged and it's not labeled."

Interestingly, one of its engineers found that when it got a mall site with one of its new partners, the local service provider had installed fiber throughout its facility.

Since the fiber was already installed, the mall owner asked if Granite could leverage the existing facilities to deliver its service.

"We sent our lead engineer out to do a site survey and he got there and the whole mall was already fibered and the owner didn't know," Norton said. "The entire mall had been fibered by the incumbent and they had no idea because the incumbent said that the mall manager signed off on it."

Regardless of the issues it and its mall partners see during the installation process, what's compelling about Granite Grid is that the service provider will handle the entire installation process so these companies can provide their tenants a mix of high speed data bandwidth that they can't get from an ILEC or cable operator. By plugging into the Grid, mall operators and retailers gain access to a greater suite of voice and data products coupled with Granite's support and billing platform.

Leveraging services it purchases from local ILECs, Granite said it can offer property owners speeds from 100 Mbps up to 1 Gbps and various speeds in between. The company has worked with its service provider partners to shorten delivery times from 60 days to 30 days.

"The type of pipes we're buying from the incumbents are scalable, but take time to get delivered by the incumbents so the SLA can be anywhere from 60 to 120 days," Norton said. "Because we have such great relationships with the incumbents, we've been able to push those turnaround times down to about a month."

Once it has the necessary circuits, Granite can get the Grid product installed at a site within 7-10 business days. During this process, the service provider will put in a main distribution frame (MDF) at the mall site and equip each retailer site with intermediate devices to access services.

"After all of that work is done, it is plug and play, and we're delivering services to the tenants -- because from the MDF to the tenant we're running a Cat 5 and Cat 6 cable with an Ethernet handoff -- plug it into the gear, and we're off and running," Norton said. "The ease of installation for the tenants and quality of service gets greater and greater as we add more malls in the mix because our critical mass for big retailers becomes greater and greater."

But meeting the 100 mall milestone is only part of Granite's overall goal. It plans to triple the Grid's footprint to over 300 locations within the next 12 months.

Up until now, all of these sites have been in enclosed areas. Granite sees an opportunity to complement its wireline network builds with fixed wireless technology.

Norton said that by offering a broadband wireless extension service, which it is testing with a few key customers, it can support open air properties. Kimco Realty has 800 properties across the country where they will have a main building with 10-15 retailers in it and a Home Depot or a Target will be in a detached nearby location.

"It becomes cost prohibitive if we have to trench to each individual building, so we're beta testing in the Northeast and down in the South a product that allows us to install the Grid in the main building and do point-to-point wireless from the main property to the outlier buildings," Norton said. "We're pretty close to having a few property owners letting us do a proof of concept for that model and when that proves out, I think the 300 number is one we'll cruise on by."

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