CUSTOMER SUCCESS STORY

Sentinel Real Estate Corporation

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

REASONS FOR ENGAGEMENT

- Design and implement WAN to improve collaboration and streamline business processes between headquarters and 156 remote sites

WHY CISCO SERVICES

- Technical expertise
- Reputation
- Proactive management
- Understanding of client's business

BENEFITS REALIZED

- Improved WAN performance across all network sites
- Improved collaboration and data sharing among all company locations
- More efficient agents
- Improved client satisfaction and lower tenant churn
- Greater flexibility and speed bringing new locations online

Company Overview
Founded in 1969, Sentinel Real Estate Corporation manages separate and pooled accounts holding diversified portfolios of real estate properties valued at $5 billion. Within these portfolios are over 156 properties in 29 states, ranging from multifamily rental properties to office buildings, industrial facilities and shopping centers.

Over 100 real estate professionals manage these investments from Sentinel's national headquarters in New York, while another 1,100 employees manage properties via regional offices and at the specific properties.

Reasons for Engagement
In an effort to reduce churn among current residents, Sentinel sought to improve collaboration and standardize processes between Sentinel's New York headquarters and all 156 field offices throughout the country. According to Sentinel's Senior Vice President and CIO Emile Rashkovich, "a lot of the processes in place were very localized at the time. Each location had to do unusual things to bring data and processes to New York where the management resides."

As part of improving collaboration and standardizing processes, Rashkovich needed to overhaul the current Wide Area Network (WAN) design. The new WAN design had to be optimized for throughput, as local broadband access options vary tremendously by office location and aren't always ideal. According to Rashkovich, "we're very dispersed geographically, and many of our last-mile connections are thin." Sentinel's WAN needed to be optimized to manage a variety of different applications as efficiently as possible. "It was important for us to maintain the maximum uptime, and to make sure that the WAN links were maximized for throughput."

Conducting business without bottlenecks or technical problems is vital to facilitating necessary communications and collaborations between employees at different locations. Finally, the WAN design had to be flexible enough to be replicated at new site locations very rapidly. Sentinel's network is "fairly complex with a lot of moving pieces," according to Rashkovich. New office locations open up frequently and existing offices change buildings. They needed a design that could get new network sites online very quickly and with minimal technical support necessary for maintaining the new sites.

Why Cisco Services
Sentinel chose Cisco and a Cisco-certified partner – FusionStorm – for this engagement primarily because of its reputation, technical expertise, understanding of Sentinel's business and proactive management. Sentinel made a decision twelve years ago to standardize on Cisco gear and has never looked back: "With the investment that we've made in the equipment, knowledge base,

people's training and the reputation of [Cisco] and where it was going, we've never really changed our direction," according to Rashkovich. Sentinel will periodically upgrade older Cisco hardware with newer models to ensure that their business does not fall too far behind, however the Cisco core has stood the test of time. Rashkovich attributes this longevity to the expertise Cisco contributed to the design and architecture of the core. "That was an important step that we relied on outside Cisco expertise for."

Rashkovich believes that Cisco engineers are better trained and better informed of network system intricacies and really stand out among competitors. Additionally, Cisco's emphasis on training Sentinel's IT staff on the more technical aspects of the networking gear and architecture makes a big difference when evaluating providers for network services and support engagements. Cisco services helped their organization plan ahead for future technical needs that would support future business growth.

When problems arise that require escalation beyond his internal staff, Rashkovich reports seeing the same engineers "over and over again" and believes that the continuity "that this particular individual has worked on your network before and knows what they're doing, creates a level of comfort." Responsiveness is another hallmark that Rashkovich appreciates. He recalls one problem with one of Sentinel's core switches that was addressed within just a few hours. He views the quick resolution as a "testimony of the quality of equipment and support" and is "glad to go with somebody who is reputable, who stands behind their product and can support us quickly and with quality."Additionally, Rashkovich reports having an excellent relationship with FusionStorm, their Cisco-certified partner. "They come visit us, and they understand our business [needs]. They are able to offer us support and services that we're very satisfied with." Sentinel also appreciates the proactive nature of FusionStorm's support: "When they see an opportunity out there with new technology or something that they feel we could benefit from, they will tell us about it and then we can get together and discuss pros and cons. That kind of proactive mindset is something that you want in your vendors."

The Solution
Cisco and FusionStorm designed a core WAN architecture for Sentinel, which included setting up a VPN through Cisco routers at all 156 properties in 29 states. This core design has served as a strong foundation for further WAN deployments and changes as Sentinel has opened up new office locations and moved offices from one location to another. According to Rashkovich, "We sought outside expertise to make sure the core was designed and architected properly" in order to avoid potential problems down the road.

Once the WAN was deployed, Cisco and FusionStorm continued to play on ongoing advisor role by assisting Sentinel with other needs, including storage and security. Rashkovich attributes this breadth of knowledge and expertise as a key to his satisfaction. "[Because] they have other people that they deal with that are in a similar boat, they are able to offer us support and services that we're very satisfied with." This ongoing, collaborative relationship is what enables Cisco and its partners to work closely with customers like Sentinel so they receive the most value possible.

Benefits
The WAN planning, design and implementation by Cisco and FusionStorm provided instant change in Sentinel's business processes and capabilities. Employees gained more collaborative functionality across all locations, which meant that they became more efficient while remaining spread out across regional offices and properties. This efficiency gave them more time to create proactive solutions for dealing with residential and commercial customer problems. As a result, customer problems are now solved more quickly and there is less customer churn. Sentinel was better capable of providing proactive solutions for customer problems that cut down response time when issues arise, leading to higher rates of resident and commercial tenant retention that directly impacted the company's overall business model.

According to Rashkovich, "with the establishment of the wide area network, collaboration and data sharing became the norm. The [way of] working with the field [staff] has improved dramatically."

Additionally, Sentinel has been able to replicate the original design blueprint for branch locations to accommodate frequent relocations and new sites. "It's important for us, when we establish a new location, to bring up all the network services and make sure that we are properly configured on both ends, and do it on a timely basis so that they can get up and running and produce right away," according to Rashkovich." It's imperative that we operate right away as we bring more assets into the network. For all these years, [Cisco's design] has been working." Once local carrier connections are arranged, any new site on Sentinel's network is online and fully operational the same day.

While Rashkovich values knowledge transfer to his internal staff, he also leverages Cisco's breadth of knowledge to augment his staff's knowledge base. By tapping into "expertise from the outside," Rashkovich can minimize head count and run a leaner operation without compromising the value of his department.

Conclusion
Rashkovich is very satisfied with Cisco's WAN implementation at Sentinel. "There is strong continuity in the individual engineers who support Sentinel's network, and they are adept at handling issues because they are extensively trained on Cisco technology," Rashkovich notes. According to him, "[Cisco sends us very] good people. We often see the same people over and over again, which tells us that there's not a lot of turnover. People who acquire Cisco skills, they tend to stick with that platform and stick with that knowledge. When you see continuity, and you know that this particular individual has worked on your network before and knows what they're doing, then that creates a level of comfort that we could certainly use with other products as well."

The WAN design and implementation Cisco and FusionStorm did for Sentinel has been efficient and flexible. According to Rashkovich, "I'm satisfied. I think we have a robust and well-engineered network. We don't have any downtime to speak of. Employees are getting exactly what they expect from the system. At this point, we bring to the business all the tools of the networking that's out there that they could possibly wish for."

For more information
For more information about Cisco services, visit www.cisco.com/go/services or contact your Cisco service account manager.

This interview for this story was conducted and documented by **Chadwick Martin Bailey**, and sponsored by Cisco Systems.

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