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FIXED OPS



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WHEN WI-FI CRAMPS SERVICE PRODUCTIVITY

TOP-NOTCH WIRELESS NETWORKS ARE CRUCIAL IN
TODAY'S SERVICE DEPARTMENTS

BY ERIK NACHBAHR

Have you ever called your Internet Service Provider (ISP) to complain about slow service, only to be told the problem is with your Wi-Fi router? It's relatively easy to verify data speeds promised by your ISP, but most dealerships don't have a way to easily test how much bandwidth their wireless network can support. This is unfortunate because in today's data-hungry work environments, insufficient bandwidth can have a significant negative impact on productivity.

A few years ago, installing Wi-Fi meant running down to Best Buy and purchasing a \$60 router. These residential routers may be fine for your home, but they're woefully inadequate for today's data requirements in your dealership. In my experience, 99 percent of dealerships' wireless networks don't provide enough bandwidth for the demands being placed on them.

Nowhere is this more apparent than in the Service Department. In recent years, many Service Departments have completely overhauled outdated processes. Thanks to new technologies, they have become more

efficient and profitable than ever. At the same time, these technologies have exponentially increased the amount of data being transferred over the network.

What follows is a rundown of all the devices putting demands on your Wi-Fi network in the Service Department on a daily basis.



Mobile Tablets

The adoption of mobile tablets into Service Department processes has increased dramatically in the last few years. Mobile tablets are routinely used to greet customers in the Service lane, open repair orders, do vehicle inspections and take notes, photos and more. All of these activities require a lot of bandwidth.

As with any new technology, the initial adoption phase is critical to long-term success. If your Service Advisors and Technicians are tapping on screens and seeing nothing but spinning circles, they may resist using tablets altogether. If your dealership invests thousands of dollars in tablet technology and your employees refuse to use them, that's money flushed down the drain.

Having sufficient Wi-Fi bandwidth in your Service Department is critical to the successful adoption of mobile tablet technology.

Vehicle Computer System Updates

Many vehicles today require computer system updates from the manufacturer on a regular basis. Because your customers' cars are in the Service bay when this happens, all the data is transferred via your wireless network.

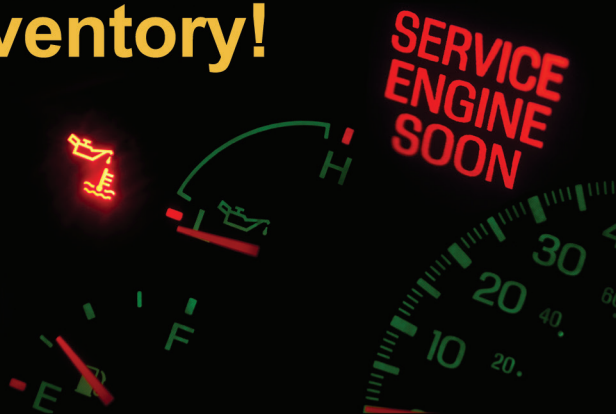
IF YOUR SERVICE
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The slower your Wi-Fi, the more time it takes for these updates to be successfully installed. Imagine how much productive your Technicians could be if they could cut this time in half — literally! This can be easily accomplished with enterprise-grade routers, which deliver data two to three times faster than the typical residential router purchased from a consumer electronics retailer.

Third-party Software

Many dealerships use third-party software in the Service Department. Examples include Service scheduling and vehicle inspection software. Most of today's software applications are cloud-based, which means they connect to your dealership's network via wireless. These products won't work properly without sufficient bandwidth, and many vendors that offer them are starting to require a certain amount of wireless coverage before they agree to install.

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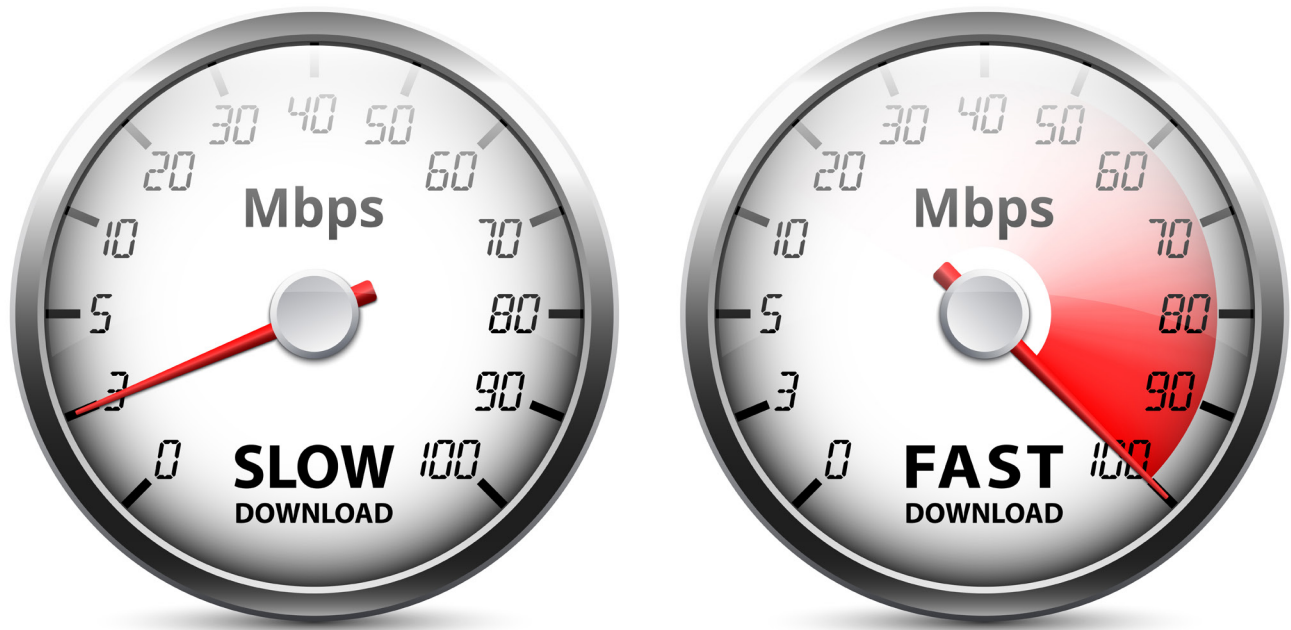
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Cell Phones

How often do you see a customer in your Service lounge, looking at their phone? Do you know what they're doing? They may be texting or checking emails, activities that don't require a lot of bandwidth. Then again, they may be viewing the latest Facebook videos or watching a movie, activities that are total bandwidth-hogs. Employees are also connecting to your Wi-Fi throughout the day with their cell phones. Surfing the Internet, playing games and watching videos are common activities that put a tremendous strain on outdated wireless networks.

Smart Appliances

Smart appliances are smart for a reason; they transmit and receive data over the Internet. You know that fancy new coffee machine that alerts you when it's time to re-order filters? It can do that because it's connected to your Wi-Fi. If you've recently installed a new refrigerator, water heater or oven range, they may also require Wi-Fi connectivity in order to operate. By themselves, appliances do not use a ton of bandwidth. But when piled on top of everything else — well, have you ever heard of that saying, "It was the straw that broke the camel's back?"

Your Slow Internet Checklist

When your Internet is slow, it's tempting to blame your Internet Service Provider (ISP). That may not be correct, however. Here's a brief checklist on how to determine the root cause of your slow Internet:

- ☑ **ISP.** Do you have a "small business" product? Connections such as cable Internet are frequently shared with residential customers, which can slow down your business. Be sure that you have an enterprise-grade product that is typically provided over fiber optics.
- ☑ **Wi-Fi.** If you have an enterprise-level Internet package and your Internet is still slow, check your Wi-Fi network. It may not be sufficient to handle the increased data speeds. Add enterprise-grade routers and more wireless access points.
- ☑ **Switches.** If your Internet is still slow after upgrading your Wi-Fi network, chances are some of your network infrastructure is outdated. Network switches that were adequate three years ago may not be able to handle the increased network traffic created by today's cloud-based software applications, more user devices, video and other bandwidth-hungry applications.
- ☑ **Security Breach.** If your network isn't adequately protected, hackers can access and affect computers with spyware and viruses. This slows down computer performance, including Internet access. Have your IT staff or vendor check for security breaches.
- ☑ **Computers.** Outdated computers may not be able to handle today's bandwidth requirements. Check to make sure your computers have adequate memory and disk space and remove any unauthorized software programs and browser add-ons, which can slow down Internet performance.
- ☑ **Employees.** Your employee browsing habits may be partially to blame. Viewing non-work related videos and visiting high-traffic, non-work related websites can slow down the Internet connection for everyone else. Be sure that every employee knows and follows policies and procedures for website use, and install an application that identifies misused computers and blocks inappropriate websites.

More data requires more Internet bandwidth. The first step to achieving sufficient bandwidth in your Service Department is to upgrade your Internet service with your ISP. I have written previously about the difference between “small business” service and “enterprise-level” service. Small business service from ISPs is not much better than residential service and is designed for small offices with no more than five or six computers. Dealerships should be using “enterprise-level” service, which in many areas delivers screaming fast Internet right to the curb via fiber optics.

The second — and most overlooked — step to achieving adequate bandwidth is to upgrade your Wi-Fi network. A \$60 consumer router and a single wireless access point cannot possibly support the data flow in a typical Service Department. Enterprise-grade routers are available starting at \$200 to \$300. Not only do they deliver data at two to three times the speed of residential routers, they also offer additional benefits such as increased security, signal optimization, noise reduction

(which can be helpful in a Service Department) roaming optimization and more..

So, if your Service Department is considering adopting mobile tablets, or if your employees are having problems with the mobile tablets you currently have, or if you are experiencing slow Internet speeds and / or software problems, think twice before blaming the technology or your vendors.

DEALERSHIPS SHOULD BE USING

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The problem could very well lie in your wireless network. The good news is that upgrading is a relatively inexpensive, easy and quick fix. It will probably be the best investment you make all year.



Erik Nachbahr founded Timonium, Maryland-based Helion Automotive Technologies in 1997 to help bring automotive dealerships into the modern information technology (IT) world by transforming their networks to improve productivity and business practices

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