Uplevel Helps Hoku Foods Keep Checkout Lines Moving

Grocery store saves time and reduces customer frustration by migrating to Uplevel and smoothing out ISP interruptions

No one likes long checkout lines at the grocery store, especially when they end up getting overcharged. When frequent Internet outages disrupted payment processing at the Hoku Foods Natural Market, cloudTower Networks used gateways from Uplevel Systems to restore order.

Based in Kapaa, Hawaii, on the island of Kauai, Hoku Foods uses service from Spectrum, the island's leading Internet service provider (ISP) to link its cash registers to payment processing companies – a good plan, until the Internet connection fails. Hoku Foods and other local merchants suffer frequent ISP outages that disrupt cash registers and credit card authorizations in the middle of customer transactions.

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> **Erik Pendleton**
> **President, Hoku Foods Natural Market**

"We serve hundreds of customers each day," says Erik Pendleton, President of Hoku Foods Natural Market. "If service goes down and connectivity is interrupted even a fraction of the time, that inconveniences quite a few customers."

On a regular basis, Spectrum service would go offline for 1 to 3 minutes and interrupt payment authorizations from banks. The inability to access the Internet meant the store's point of sale (POS) systems could not receive the confirmations needed to close out transactions. Customers might be prompted to swipe their cards again and wind up getting charged two or three times for a single purchase. And in some cases, the transaction might complete without inventory systems being updated.

Pendleton estimates the company incurred such outages more than 200 times during an eighteen-month period, frustrating customers and posing a major threat to brand loyalty. Understanding that, "Some people can't afford to be without fifty or a hundred dollars for days at a time due to billing mistakes," the Hoku Foods team had to resort to a time-consuming manual reconciliation process. The fix involved exporting credit card transactions each night, scanning for duplicates, and immediately issuing refunds that, unfortunately, might still be delayed.

In exploring alternatives to this time-consuming approach, the retailer consulted its managed information technology (IT) provider, cloudTower Networks, who proposed a far simpler, more preventative fix. cloudTower suggested adding a secure, integrated dual-WAN gateway from Uplevel to achieve instant failover from the primary ISP service to a second provider for uninterrupted service.

Compared with the Uplevel approach, upgrading an existing router to create a dual-WAN configuration to support failover to a second ISP would have cost Hoku Foods an additional $7-8K for equipment alone. cloudTower looked at other traditional – and far more costly – alternatives, such as deploying an LTE gateway and using a cellular data network, and ultimately found Uplevel to be the fastest, easiest, most cost-effective option.

How It Works

cloudTower Networks installed Uplevel's Unbox gateway in a dual-WAN setup using two ISP accounts. In the event of a Spectrum service outage, the Uplevel gateway quickly switches to the secondary ISP via a DSL connection without transactions being dropped. This way, so long as the DSL stays up, the grocer maintains a reliable connection to its payment processors and can continue accepting credit cards.

As an added bonus, cloudTower and Hoku Foods were able to collaborate remotely to install the new solution without technicians needing to go onsite. Based on the mainland, the MSP pre-configured and shipped the Uplevel gateway and talked the Hoku team through the install by phone. cloudTower then used Uplevel's remote management capabilities to complete the setup.

"We just plugged it in and it worked," Pendleton confirms. "It was 'plug and play' out of the box and very simple to

get up and running." In contrast, cloudTower estimates configuring another device such as a Juniper or SonicWall router would have taken up to a week and required technicians to be dispatched.

The simplicity of Uplevel's remote management also reduced the amount of ongoing support required. Since installing the new solution, Hoku Foods reports zero issues with dropped payment transactions despite adopting other new technologies simultaneously.

"We put the Uplevel box in just prior to moving to a new POS system and payment processor," Pendleton says. "We're now getting approvals incredibly fast, perhaps three times faster. Customers are very impressed by the new and improved sales flow and we're saving valuable time each day by not having to audit previous days transactions for duplicates and overall sleeping better at night."

"Manager's Special": One Solution, Multiple Benefits

A single Uplevel gateway delivers enterprise-class routing, firewall, file server, virtual private network (VPN), SD-WAN, and domain management services for improved security – without MSPs or customers ever having to buy equipment. The subscription model lets MSPs bring enterprise-class solutions to customers while reducing capital outlay and improving remote management and troubleshooting via the cloud. Uplevel also supports compliance with payment card industry (PCI) standards for protecting customer privacy.

But for Erik Pendleton and the Hoku team, the biggest benefit is the peace of mind that comes with inspiring greater customer confidence. "It can take years to regain the trust of customers that have been charged incorrectly multiple times," Pendleton says. "But with the new system, we're well on our way to winning back their loyalty one seamless transaction at a time."