

CloseCall retooling to compete in changing market

By **RICHARD McNEY**
Editor

STEVENSVILLE — Over the last few years new competition has flooded the telecom industry marketplace, according to Mark Savage, vice president of CloseCall America's wireless division. Cable companies have entered the market, offering bundled options that include cable, broadband Internet and telephone service.

"They have become larger players in the market," Savage said. "We have had to retool a little bit and come up with some new technologies of our own to compete with those products."

CloseCall America, which began business in 1999, is located in the Chesapeake Bay Business Park in Stevensville. The firm was named CloseCall because it initially specialized in close calls, but today it provides its customers local and long distance phone service, bundled packages, wireless service, BlackBerry service, high-speed Internet, wireless Internet, standard dial-up and voice over Internet protocol (VoIP — also known as digital phone service) primarily throughout the Mid-Atlantic. The firm operated independently until 2004 when it was acquired by its parent company, Bethesda-based telecom firm MobilePro. CloseCall employs 40 today.

CloseCall and its sister company, American Fiber Network, which is located in Overland Park, Kan., just outside Kansas City, offer high speed Internet in the Verizon territories of the Midwest and Mid-Atlantic. The companies offer long distance and local phone service throughout the U.S., excluding West Virginia and Washington, D.C. The firms provide wireless services in all U.S. states.

Gearing Up to Compete in the Wireless Market

"People are not just using (cell phones) for voice anymore," Savage said. "Our customer base has always been slightly older, but even they are using text messaging and want cameras."

The changes in the marketplace have led CloseCall to introduce solutions to meet customers' expectations. Seeing the increase in demand for PDAs, CloseCall entered into an agreement almost two years ago with Research in Motion (RIM) to offer BlackBerry products, according to Cheryl McPherson, executive director of CloseCall's wireless division.

"We have become pretty savvy in the support areas and stepping forward and marketing these products to the general public both on the residential and the business side," she said.

CloseCall unveiled its newest BlackBerry products in September — the 8830 and 8330 Curve.

"CloseCall's customers can always rely on receiving cutting-edge communications technology," said Ryan Telle, director of marketing for CloseCall. "At the same time, our customers also receive the best value for their money, with substantial costs savings and superior customer service."

The firm has an agreement with RIM to sell its BlackBerry Enterprise Server and Technical Support Services. The server enables businesses to secure and manage information transmitted on their BlackBerry products.

"We are one of only a handful of suppliers in the country to be able to sell the BlackBerry Enterprise Server, the licenses that come with it and the T support," Savage said. "We sell it at a deep discount off of RIM MSRP. We are able to prospect into very large *Fortune*



PHOTO BY RICHARD McNEY

Pictured are CloseCall America employees Jaime Van Allen, Cheryl McPherson, Mark Savage and Ryan Telle.

500 companies. Our customer list includes some of the biggest names out there. It is an area we continue to grow and focus on."

Server sales have been successful, with more than a million dollars in sales in the last two months alone from only one sales person selling it, Savage said.

"We want to duplicate that as many times over as we can," he said.

CloseCall also offers a variety of wireless rate plans to meet the needs of customers. In addition to traditional plans, the company also offers low-use plans that other carriers do not and plans for businesses so they can pool their minutes.

Digital Phone Service and Sales Staff

CloseCall is working on developing a new VoIP product that should be launched in about a month, according to Jamie Van Allen, vice president of the wired division. The company initially offered a VoIP product a few years ago, but discontinued it because it was not E911 compliant, she said.

"We are launching it again through a different company with the kinks fixed," she said.

Digital phone service costs much less than a traditional phone service and offers users a lot of control, she said.

CloseCall is hiring an experienced sales staff to market its digital phone service as well as its other products, she said.

"Our main focus is the digital phone and getting a sales force out there," she said. "Before, we focused mainly on the residential customers."

The business has always been about 85 to 90 percent residential and 10 to 15 percent business, Savage said.

"We are making a push to have a consistent acquiring of business accounts," he said.

The first few sales representatives will work out of the Stevensville office and when the processes are established the company plans to hire staff to work in other areas, he said. The company already has one sales representative who works out of New York and has been successful, he said.

Customer Service

CloseCall has always prided itself on its commitment to superior customer service, with all calls handled locally by live operators.

"We can give you a low price and also the best customer service out there," Van Allen said. "We definitely still pride ourselves on the customer service aspect of it."

"We compete with price point and customer service," Savage said.

CloseCall has developed several customer-friendly programs with all inclusive pricing.

"That was huge for us to retain customers and get new ones," Van Allen said. "Other companies add in costs. We have been able to maintain the rates and not raise them with the rest of the industry."

The company plans to introduce a bundled package of Internet, phone and cable service, she said. They are currently looking for a cable provider.

Most of CloseCall's employees are from the local area, but Savage said he would like to see even more local graduates look to the business for employment.

"We are small, but we are still here nine to 10 years later," Van Allen said.

For information on CloseCall America, visit www.closecall.com or call 1-877-812-5673.

CORSICA

From
Page 21

never had a problem. It has worked really well."

Corsica Technologies' business customers are mostly located on the Delmarva Peninsula, but they do have customers on the western shore and in Virginia. The firm also supports businesses that have branch offices throughout the U.S. using remote assistance and subcontracting Microsoft Gold Certified Partner IT firms outside the region.

Residential and Government

Corsica Technologies offers residential IT support through its drop-off

locations at all of its offices except its Annapolis location. Technicians will also come to the customer to provide service. The business has a small stock of products and software at its locations.

The business still fills contract staffing, service, support and data management needs on the government side. Several Corsica Technologies' employees work in the Washington, D.C., area for the U.S. Department of State managing networks, Walls said.

Employees and the Future

"We have good people," Walls said. "Our experience and leadership ability here at Corsica Technologies is some-

thing that is hard to come by. Duane and I have run teams of 30 at the age of 20 and a network as large as 7,500 users. Being able to handle that responsibility speaks to what we can do for businesses."

The business gets a lot of resumes weekly from technicians of all levels and has not had difficulty finding good employees, Walls said.

The industry does have a "chicken and egg problem" when it comes to employees, he said.

"People don't have any experience before they start," he said. "We have a model to take in people who don't have a lot of experience. They can start at an

entry level and grow and move up levels. We hire them and present them with the next stepping stone here. That has worked out great."

The business does not hard-sell potential customers, but rather advises and educates them, Walls said. People fear what they do not know and many people do not know about technology, he said. Corsica Technologies advises its clients, removing the fear, he said.

Walls expects his business to double again this year.

"The plan is to continue to do a good job," he said.

For information on Corsica Technologies, visit www.corsicatech.com.