



Case Study: Skylinks Delivers Service to Small Businesses throughout Africa with PIKA WARP Appliance

Customer: Skylinks provides satellite communications throughout Africa, offering services that include voice, data, broadcast video, and corporate teleconferencing. www.skylinksltd.com and www.skycallpbx.com

Challenge: Provide a feature-rich, easy to use, <30 phone extension IP-PBX that would withstand harsh and rugged environments without failure..

Solution: PIKA WARP Appliance

Benefits: Skylinks is able to aggressively penetrate the small office/home office business market. The failure rate and service requirements of Skylinks' small-business solutions has been dramatically reduced...

Africa's large size, dispersed population, rugged environment and many remote communities all make terrestrial Internet connectivity difficult to provide to the continent. In fact, 2007 United Nations data estimated Internet connectivity in Africa at less than four percent, broadband penetration at below one percent, and the cost of connectivity as the highest in world at US\$250-\$300 per month.

Given the challenges associated with land-based access in Africa, satellite and GSM have emerged as the two most important means of connecting Africans with each other and with the world. Skylinks is a communications service provider that delivers voice, data, broadcast video and corporate teleconferencing services to Africa using satellite links.

The company's most recent offering is the SkyCall pure IP-PBX a solution designed for small offices and home offices (SOHO) that is based on the PIKA WARP Appliance. Skylinks credits the PIKA WARP appliance for enabling it to pursue the SOHO market and will soon (2010) use PIKA to expand penetration in this market segment through GSM networks.

Rugged and Reliable

As CEO of Skylinks, Haim Lewy has spent the past four years building a business around more than connectivity to business and corporations in Africa. Providing exceptional solutions and support is just as important. "We have our own brand of IP-PBXs and that is an important distinction. There is a big difference between VOIP providers who simply terminate calls and providers like us who provide complete solutions and support."

But that comes with certain challenges. "Africa is a different place from the rest of the world because it's not feasible here to have support teams deployed in every city. When you deploy a product in Africa, the product itself has to be very strong, very reliable."

That was one of the challenges that Skylinks ran up against when it first attempted to address the SOHO market with a PC-based PBX. "The PCs had so many moving parts that we could not control," Lewy remembers. "In an environment like Africa's, that is very problematic because there is so much dust, and the average room temperature for these boxes is 35°C. Hard disks and motors and other moving parts tend to crash a lot in those conditions."

The PIKA WARP based solution has proven itself a reliable performer in harsh, rugged environments. “One of the things that led us to choose PIKA is that the appliance has zero moving parts inside. It is as resistant as possible to Africa’s heat and dust, and that makes it easier for us to support in more locations.”

Sleek and Sexy

Customer perception was another challenge that Skylinks faced with its PC-based PBX. “One of the things we have to do is convince the customer that an IP-PBX is just like what he’s already used to – but with more features and possibilities. When we gave them a computer, they had a hard time making that connection.”

Lewy also says that look and feel have a lot to do with the new product’s appeal. “This unit is sexy. You can hang it on the wall, it has an LCD, you can see that it’s running and that calls are passing through. It gives the customer the right look and feel and they can understand that they are buying something special.”

The WARP Appliance’s compatibility with the Asterisk platform was also very important to Skylinks, which builds all of its PBXs using Asterisk. Lewy says that the combination of the appliance with Asterisk software means that, “We are able to give our customers even more features and possibilities than they get from analog PBXs.”

Addressing the SOHO Market

“Skylinks is building a very big plan for the SOHO market,” Lewy says. “We are very serious about deploying SkyCall in large quantities. That’s possible with a box like this that is rugged and reliable and doesn’t require intense maintenance like a computer.”

He is pleasantly surprised by the performance of the deployed units. “Any device has a tough life in Africa. We’re very happy with PIKA and we expect to have 200 units deployed in the next six months.”

Lewy and his team are also very eager to begin using PIKA’s forthcoming GSM module. While terrestrial providers reach a tiny percentage of African households and businesses, GSM companies reach about one third of the population. “Cell access is much more reliable than landline service here,” Lewy notes. “With the GSM module, customers will be able to use the SkyCall iPBX and still have outgoing lines but without needing any terrestrial infrastructure.”

Lewy adds that “PIKA’s service was one of the biggest surprises that we had. If we call PIKA, they answer immediately, and they really know what they are talking about. You can tell that they love what they do. If they don’t know the answer they will get it for you in a day or two. Most importantly, though, we didn’t really need to use their service that much. The WARP Appliance worked out of the box.”

The PIKA Advantage

With two decades of experience in this industry, we are recognized for earning strong relationships with our customers around the world by delivering direct, expert technical support. Headquartered in Ottawa, ON, Canada, our company has ranked in The Branham300, an authoritative ranking of successful Canadian high tech firms, for seven consecutive years. PIKA also won Product of the Year Award from OCRI (Ottawa Centre for Research and Innovation) in 2009.

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