

TourTechSupport

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Allen Cook, Owner, TourTechSupport, Inc.

Challenge

Provide reliable, consistent, secure, access-controlled Wi-Fi and VoIP services to touring and event professionals in the entertainment, sports, corporate, media and political industries

Create portable, all-in-one offices for on-the-road professionals

Create a system that even crew members, with little or no training, can set up quickly and easily.

Results

An IT rack that artists can travel with and simply plug in at each venue

A secure, access-controlled network that can adapt to the layout of each venue

Seamless WiFi and VoIP connectivity that allows touring professionals to work more efficiently and effectively



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The life of a touring rock musician is complicated, hectic, and occasionally downright chaotic. There are dozens of people, each with jobs that demand constant communication and coordination. When the talent hits the stage, everything has to be working seamlessly to provide the paying fans with adrenaline-stoking lifetime memories.

That means information needs to flow fast and reliably. So, how do you network a business that exists in constant motion?

The behind-the-scenes operations of tours are complex. As many as 60 or more crew, staff, and band members need phone and internet access on a daily basis to coordinate schedules, communicate across and between venues, as well as stay in touch with friends and family. Until recently, they had to rent phone lines, voicemail, extension dialing, call-waiting and Internet access from the venues they played.

In every new city, there were new phone numbers to remember, new network connections to configure, and little control in restricting network access. In addition, each phone line and Internet trunk cost about \$150 per day. The costs - and the headaches - added up quickly.

Cook saw a need, and set out to fill it. His company, TourTechSupport, created an IT rack system that touring professionals can take with them on the road—including wireless routers, access points, printers and other business communication essentials. He knew that the

system had to be easy to launch at each new venue, so that any crew member on the tour can set it up. "With Meraki, I can support my clients anywhere in the world, because I can monitor networks remotely...In the rare case of equipment failure, replacement components can be on-site quickly and untrained staff can make the swap," Cook says.

TourTechSupport is not the only purveyor of such touring systems. Competitors have employed "linear" AP/Repeater-based wireless distribution systems. To raise the bar, Cook began looking at mesh technology to provide a secure signal across entire venues, connecting the sound engineer and the lighting tech to the backstage crew and the office staff.

Cook examined multiple wireless solutions, but found most to be hard to deploy, inconsistent and often very expensive. One tested system involved a Motorola 900MHz canopy system. "We discovered it tops out at 1 meg and it was exorbitantly expensive," said Cook. "With Meraki, we can accomplish much more for much less."

Beyond data communication, he also wanted to include VoIP, so that tours could use telephone numbers that would remain the same regardless of their geographic location, as well as provide place shifting technology to meet demand for leisure time entertainment.

"The power and versatility of mesh really sets our services apart from our competitors," Cook said. He considered Linksys solutions, available through Cisco, and options from EnGenious and Ubiquity, but found them less flexible, more expensive and often complicated.



Then Cook called upon Meraki. By including 5 or 10 Meraki Outdoors with the IT rack, all a crew member had to do was establish an internet connection, strategically place the Meraki access points, power-up and voila: high-quality, access-controlled Wi-Fi in just minutes. "What really sold us was the signal meter," Cook says. "It allows crew members to easily find the optimal placement for each repeater, maximizing network strength." Portability and aesthetics are also important. Meraki repeaters are, "smaller and slicker than anything else on the market," he says.

The systems from TourTechSupport are used for everything from coordinating where the crew members stay each night, to providing VoIP phone service, to entertaining the entertainers. Controlling access into and across the networks is crucial. “We frown on open networks. If a tour manager’s computer is on an open network, anyone with a basic knowledge has access to the tour budget, housing schedule and other confidential information,” Cook said. Meraki’s security features keep the network strictly private.

TourTech’s partnership with The Dave Matthews Band is a great example of how Meraki makes touring a better experience. The Dave Matthews Band has 50 crew members on a nearly endless touring schedule. They tour with 13 trucks and 9 buses. Matthews is an outspoken activist on green issues, as well. His tour’s system includes a Meraki Solar that extends the WiFi signal beyond the walls of the main structure.

“Many venues do not have accommodations that allow the entire crew ample work and rest space,” Cook explains. “This used to mean that Ethernet and power cables needed to be run between the main facility and auxiliary accommodations. Now, they simply place a Meraki Outdoor at the main facility and a Meraki Solar by each outlying facility—Internet and communication across the entire compound.”

The Beyonce tour operates without a dedicated IT technician on the road. “We used their tour as our ultimate test for the ease-of-use of a system,” Cook said. “If we don’t get any calls for support, we know we have built an IT rack that meets our user-friendly requirements.” The only support call he’s received so far from the Beyonce tour ended up being an issue with a crew member’s laptop; the IT rack and the mesh were working perfectly.

Cook started out by helping concert tours save money, and still keeps that ethic in everything TourTechSupport does. Saving his clients money and improving their efficiency is not just Cook’s passion, but his livelihood.