

WRITTEN TESTIMONY
OF
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Before the Subcommittee on Communications and Technology
“Rural Call Quality and Reliability”

Chairman Walden and distinguished members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the invitation to speak at today’s hearing. My name is Eric LeBeau and I am the General Manager of Dakin Farm, Inc. in Ferrisburgh, Vermont. I am honored to be here today to discuss “Rural Call Quality and Reliability” and to answer any questions you may have.

Dakin Farm, Inc. is a family owned business that has been a staple of Vermont landscape for over 50 years. Sam Cutting IV, President and Owner, has followed in the footsteps of his father and helped guide Dakin Farm from a road side stand to a well-known and well respected multi-channel retailer. We have two retail locations in Vermont, a robust catalog and a state-of-the-art website. Our customers are from all over the country and in some cases different parts of the world. In 2015, we shipped almost 44,000 packages during the holiday season and shipped over 67,000 packages for the year. We are a very seasonal business. Our sales are over \$7 million annually and around 70% generated from Thanksgiving until Christmas.

As you might guess we rely heavily on our telecommunication infrastructure to allow our customers to reach us – either with questions or orders. Our internet and phone connections are a key component to a successful holiday season. In the off-season we may take 600 calls in a month. During

the holiday season we have days when we will answer 1000 inbound telephone calls. It is no mystery we use Vermont and the Vermont family tradition in our marketing efforts. We use old-fashioned methods to prepare our meats and we use “What Vermont Tastes Like” as our tag line to inspire a feeling of a simpler time. All the while in the back-ground using state-of-the-art techniques to take the order, process the order and get the order to our customer’s doorstep.

During our 2010 holiday season is when I first noticed issues with incoming calls. That season it was more of a nuisance than a problem. We would receive, very sporadically, calls that were of very poor quality. We would also, again very sporadically, take calls that when you answered no one was there – just air. I would get into contact with the long distance provider handling our inbound toll-free long distance calls – BCN at the time - and they would do some testing and then in some cases institute a “re-route.” This would seem to solve the issue for the most part. Again, during this holiday season it was a nuisance. I was unaware of “least cost routing” and just thought it was normal procedure to have to “re-route” calls every so often.

During the 2011 off-season when we take fewer calls we did not experience or did not notice any service issues. When you don’t take as many calls you just don’t notice the issues. I have no doubt a call here or there was “dropped” but you don’t always put two-and-two together.

The 2011 holiday season was really when the issue become more prevalent. Our business was growing as we were coming out of the economic slow-down. Our call volume would begin to pick-up in late September. In October, I knew we were having some issues. At that time we began experiencing two different types of issues. The first was our customer would call and it would ring on their end but never here at Dakin Farm. We had no idea that they were attempting to reach us. Some customers would report that they tried calling us many times over and the phone would just ring and ring. Luckily most of our customers are loyal and they would try back later or the next day and that is when we

would learn of the troubles. This type of call issue was new to me and at first I mistakenly blamed it on the customer's carrier without knowing about all of the routes calls can take in getting from here to there.

The second type of issue I have already discussed. The call would be completed but the reception was so poor we could not continue the conversation OR the call seemed to be completed but we could not hear the customer on the other end. Again, this would happen to customers several times in a row and something I could prove by looking at our long distance phone bill. You could see 2, 3 or more calls coming from the same number that all lasted 1-3 seconds. We were being billed for these calls because we have a toll-free number to take such calls.

At this point it was so bad I brought in our vendor who supports our phones. I had him do several days of testing thinking maybe it was our equipment. We utilize an Automatic Call Distributor (ACD). I thought maybe we had faulty equipment. When the testing was done we could prove it was not our equipment.

I began talking to our local phone service provider, Waitsfield and Champlain Valley Telecom, specifically Kurt Gruending. He informed me that this issue was something that they had been dealing with at several of their client sites. He suggested that I continue to contact BCN, the company providing us with toll-free long distance service to receive calls, and demand that this be addressed. All I could get BCN to do every time I called was to do a "re-route." I called BCN several times a week during October and November. I begged our BCN account representative for help. He denied this issue was a "least cost routing" issue and said only that it was due to 1.) call volume and 2.) the destination point, which was Waitsfield Telecom. It continued throughout the 2011 holiday season. We dealt with it the same way we deal with any other customer service issue. We apologized and in some cases offered discounts

for the trouble it caused our customers. I do not have any proof that we lost customers but my educated guess is that we did. And I do know that it was a very long and frustrating holiday season.

After the 2011 holiday season we discussed our options with Waitsfield and tried to get a better understanding of what was happening. I was still not getting clear answers from BCN. They were still not agreeing that it was a "routing issue." As with the previous year the 2012 off season showed very little signs of an issue. My account representative at BCN felt the issues were resolved. Waitsfield was not so sure and luckily they were working on contingency plans.

As September and October rolled back around for the start of the 2012 holiday season the same issues began resurfacing and again at much higher numbers. I have an October 2012 long distance phone bill that shows a customer in San Antonio, Texas had to call us 8 times before being connected. I discussed the situation with Kurt at Waitsfield Telecom and it was decided a change was necessary. They had been working with a long distance provider, ACC, which uses AT & T as the underlying carrier. They felt very confident if we made the switch the issues would go away. We began the steps to move our 800 toll-free number from one provider to another in the middle of our most important time of year. That is all I need to really say to show how bad the situation has become. I was willing to disrupt our phone connection so that we could resolve this issue. Luckily the biggest obstacle was getting BCN to release the phone number. Once they did around December 11, 2012, the absolute pinnacle of our holiday season, the issues went away. We did not have another dropped call or another poor connection the rest of that holiday season. As a matter of fact we have not had any issues with our long distance provider since we have made this change, but I have heard from other vendors across the state that they are not as fortunate as we are to have corrected the problem.

We are lucky that Dakin Farm is able to partner with such supportive and local vendors. Waitsfield and Champlain Valley Telecom worked tirelessly for Dakin Farm and understood how

frustrating this situation was to conduct business. We are also lucky in that we had the resources to make the switch to a new long distance provider to handle the incoming calls on our toll-free number. Kurt Gruending at Waitsfield and Champlain Telecom confirmed that this “least cost routing” issue has affected other businesses and schools in the area. This issue caused great economic harm to our business a few years ago, and subsequently was a negative impact on our rural Vermont community. We need to ensure rural Vermont can connect with the rest of the world in the same way that urban and suburban communities can. And as a former Athletic Director at two high schools in Vermont I could not imagine having this type of communication issues at my school. The completion of calls should not be based on your location or a company’s need for greater profits. In the case of an emergency a parent should not have issues getting ahold of the school or their child because of these practices. Business owners should not have their years of hard work affected by the same reckless practices.

Again, I would like to thank you for this opportunity to address the Subcommittee and look forward to working with you on a solution.