

WESTMAN COMMUNICATIONS GROUP

**Providing for and Supporting the
Communities of Southwestern Manitoba**



Who is Westman Communications?

An Interview with Dave Baxter

The Manitoba Cooperative Association had the pleasure of interviewing Dave Baxter, President and CEO of Westman Communications Group who discussed some of the many different ways in which their co-op gives back to their communities through providing services while practicing the cooperative principles. Westman Communications is a consumer co-op formed in 1977 consisting of approximately 25,000 members. Their head office is in Brandon, but they operate in 44 communities across southwestern Manitoba.

The cooperative was formed with the idea of bringing cable television to southwestern Manitoba. The vision was to offer community-based programming to residents. This is how Westman Communications differs from other providers that were applying to the Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission (CRTC) for the license to serve the area. They began as a grassroots effort to start the organization as a cooperative with the idea that not only would they provide cable television services but much more. They gained the support of the community and solicited memberships to demonstrate the community support that the initiative had to the CRTC.

Support to Members

Changes in Business Operations

Dave touched upon some of the challenges their co-op faced during the pandemic and some of the business operation changes they made during this period for their members. "What we did with our members is that we gave them a 90 day pledge to not cut anybody's services off due to financial difficulties during the pandemic. We eliminated late fees and increased our member's internet speeds by at least 20% because we knew our members would be staying home a lot more than before. Whether our members are working from home or streaming entertainment content, they required reliable internet services. We announced a rate increase in February and deferred it as part of the pledge until September 1st. That was the key initiative we made to recognize our members were going through some hardships."

"Obviously, we had to follow the social distancing and sterilization protocols. In our business those measures were difficult to follow because we have installers going out to people's homes throughout southwestern Manitoba. For a while we stopped doing installations. What we started doing was enabling our members to do self-installations. That was something that we are continuing to do now that was born out of the lock-down. People still wanted services and we were not able to go out to homes. We have people coming into our front customer service area, so we had to take precautions with plexi-glass and asking people screening questions before they could access the building. There were a lot of changes we had to undertake for the health and safety of our employees and members."



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Did You Know?

- WCGtv programs are produced by local volunteers!
- You can help your local WCGtv channel be a premiere, stylish, unique operation, offering many opportunities!
- WCGtv programs create local programming that all other broadcasters in Manitoba!

WCGtv

Democratic Functions

Members, Directors, Co-op Act

"We have about 25,000 member customers. They are either residential or commercial customers. They elect the board of directors, we currently have a board of 11. We have by-laws consistent with the Manitoba Cooperatives Act and hold an annual general meeting every December where our members are invited to join us. This year we had a virtual members meeting. We seemed to get more questions virtually and a higher attendance than we did compared to our in-person meetings. We may end up doing something similar moving forward, giving people an opportunity to attend who may otherwise not be able to. This is just due to the fact that many of our communities are fairly broadly dispersed. At our annual general meeting, there is an opportunity to ask questions and provide advice. The governance model is essentially that we're governed through the board elected by our members."



Supporting Our Communities

"We do a lot to support out communities. This is an area where we ensure that we play an active role. We have for example #connectingwestmantours, where we go to communities with a radio station and do fundraising for whatever local initiative the community values. Our co-op does a matching donation from what the locals contribute. We also do events in the community throughout the day. Due to COVID, we went digital with it."

"Every community had an opportunity to put forward an idea for their community as to what we could contribute \$500 towards. Communities got quite involved in putting forth to what they thought was a worthy cause. We ended up donating over \$19,500 to those community initiatives."

"In addition, we also have an education fund. For the last roughly 20 years we have contributed over \$400,000 to scholarships. In our communities where we work, students graduating from high school going onto college or university can apply for a \$500 scholarship. Typically, that's around \$20,000 a year that we donate to that cause. Our focus on sponsorship is youth, education, technology, and women. Also, we are a major supporter of YWCA. We have been the title sponsor of the YWCA fundraising dinner."

Ensuring Members Stay Connected

"For our community programming channels we have a Brandon channel and 4 regional channels. One of the visions early on was to connect all of these communities and share programming. It took us a long time to do that, but a few years ago we finally connected all the communities with fibre and we finally can share local programming. Whether its local church services, local sporting events, dance recitals, etc. That's a difference that we provide that our competitors don't. We attribute that to being a cooperative. We train the volunteers for community programming to do the recording of events. During the pandemic, the Samaritan house food bank in Brandon was short of supplies so our radio stations put on a fundraising drive and raised around \$6,000 and we matched that, so we donated \$12,000 through listener pledges as well as us doing a matching donation. That was a very specific initiative we did during the pandemic to help out the community."

"From a business perspective, it's a very capital-intensive business, which makes it difficult for a lot of organizations to achieve the autonomy that a cooperative requires. Because it requires so much capital, we probably spend at least 5 million dollars a year beefing up our internet capacity for more speed and reliability. Now, our members expect to do their banking, social media and stream videos all from their home. The challenge for a cooperative is that there is no financing beyond members equity that you retain for reinvestment as well debt financing. We don't bring in third party investors who could influence the direction of the cooperative. So that is something about the cooperative model that we comply with."

"Currently, we're expanding into a lot of new communities. That's been a source of a lot of growth for us and our members. We added 6 rural communities to our network with fibre to the home service. Probably another 6 or 7 this year will be added. We're up to around 45 communities. We continue to expand our operations into underserved areas where they need broadband internet. We're primarily serving the communities of southwestern Manitoba and we only go far north as Swan River."

