Communication Breakthrough

For Stephen Hlibok, vice president and senior financial advisor at Merrill Lynch, the simple task of making morning telephone calls to clients was once a source of frustration. Hlibok, who is deaf, had to rely on inefficient texting and TTY relay services.

The 1960s-based equipment and services, long the standard for communication in the deaf community, created significant delays, made back-and-forth discussion nearly impossible, and took all of the personal nuances of American Sign Language (ASL) out of the equation. Simple calls that should have taken just a few minutes could stretch as long as an hour.

Hlibok’s story is one that resonates throughout the deaf community. Historically, telephone
communication has been difficult, at best, for the deaf and hard-of-hearing who primarily use ASL. But thanks to recent advancements in technology and new dedicated services, communicating in sign language is now a breeze. And no company has played a bigger role in that monumental change than Salt Lake City-based Sorenson Communications.

Hlibok, one of Sorenson’s featured success stories, now uses a Sorenson videophone and the company’s Video Relay Service (VRS) to make all his calls to hearing and deaf clientele. Sitting in front of the videophone with a high-speed Internet connection and a television, Hlibok can sign in real time with a VRS interpreter, who can then translate the words to a hearing client as they’re signed or sign directly to a deaf client.

“I am now able to assist my clients and coworkers in making an immediate decision rather than waste time replying back and forth with text communication,” Hlibok said.

Similar success stories are being told by members of the deaf community across the country. It’s a fundamental change in the way people communicate that Patrick Nola, Sorenson president and CEO, compares to the leap the hearing community made from the telegraph to the telephone.

“Vertical integration is a fundamental part of our strategy, and it’s become a strategic advantage for our company.”

Shortly after the VP-100 videophone hit the market in 2002, Sorenson’s VRS service was launched in 2003. The vertically integrated
strategy paid off, and before long, Sorenson became the choice for communication among the deaf and hard of hearing. The rapid rise, Nola noted, also created significant challenges, none bigger than recruiting and retaining sought after sign-language interpreters—a scarce human resource.

Early on, Nola said, the company learned it would have to be flexible to recruit and retain the number of ASL interpreters required to staff the VRS lines 24/7. For example, rather than ask interpreters to move to the Salt Lake headquarters, Sorenson realized it would have to open offices across the country.

“Interpreters are tied to their communities; they’re social-service oriented,” Nola said. “They want to help in their local communities, in their schools, hospitals, and churches. So we took our centers out to where the interpreters are. That was our first big step, going to them, not making them come to us.”

A handful of other key elements have made Sorensen the number one employer of ASL interpreters in the nation: the company allows its interpreters to work part time, and a full 80% of them take advantage of the offer; it pays for certification courses and recognizes higher certification levels with salary increases; and it employs a full-time professional development team that helps employees improve their skill sets and advance within the organization.

The result is a group of motivated employees and a culture with a rock-solid work ethic. Said Nola, “At Sorenson, we’re fortunate to have employees that recognize they’re doing social good just by going to work every day. That energizes us to do our jobs and provide our customers with the very best products and services.”

**Touching lives**

The right strategy and the right people have been instrumental in Sorenson Communications’ growth surge. But a third piece has been equally important: the right systems and processes.

From the ground up, the company designed its entire back-end system, tailoring it to the unique requirements of its employees and customers. From its inhouse-designed VRS call center software to customer service systems to sophisticated quality monitoring, Sorenson handled all of the heavy IT lifting internally. “Those systems are critical to our success,” Nola said. “If we didn’t have them, we wouldn’t have been able to grow the company as we have.”

And continued growth is in the forecast. The more the company touches the lives of people like Merrill Lynch’s Stephen Hlibok, the more it wants to provide the highest quality communication products and services to the entire deaf and hard-of-hearing community.

“We want to continue to take down those communication barriers and help more deaf people reach a level playing field,” Nola said. “The kind of positive impact we can have in people’s lives doesn’t happen in too many businesses. The more we see it, the more committed we become to our mission.”