

Peter Hale

Benton REA

Academic Scholarship Essay

17 November 2020

Benton REA Academic Scholarship Essay

"I think you might be muted."

"Hold on; you're cutting out."

Whether we like it or not, we are all getting familiar with this new way of working, learning, and living. While certainly not ideal, moving our interactions online can actually have benefits outside of slowing the rate of disease transmission. Many workers report increased productivity and decreased stress as they reduce their commute time and carbon footprint while saving money and spending more time exercising and interacting with their children (Cramer and Zaveri). Despite this, conducting business online has posed challenges for everyone involved.

At the forefront of many small business owner's minds is the issue of footing bills while facing a dwindling customer base (Bartik). During these economically tough times, Benton REA's temporary policy of waiving late fees and suspending disconnection (Benton REA, "Options for Paying") has been a caring act for the community. Continuing this policy for the duration of the pandemic would be invaluable for businesses that can barely stay afloat. To tackle the problem of attracting customers to struggling businesses during the pandemic, Benton REA could help establishments with curbside pickup or online stores by advertising these services in the Ruralite magazine. With online shopping being more important than ever, Benton REA could also assist businesses that do not have an online storefront by temporarily offering their website hosting and design services at a lower rate.

Another prevalent concern has been security. Zoom, which has been one of the most popular video conferencing programs during the pandemic, has had its security called into question a number of times. Even with features such as waiting rooms, passcodes, and the option to only admit individuals with trusted email domains (Zoom, "Video Conferencing"), the platform has come under fire for misleading users about encryption, sharing personal information, and improperly securing meetings (The Verge). Issues like these pose a real threat to businesses.

Additionally, products like Zoom have strained existing Internet infrastructure, especially in rural areas like ours. For example, Zoom recommends an 800kbps/1.0Mbps (up/down) connection for group calls (Zoom, "System Requirements"), which exceeds the provisions of some lower-end Internet packages, such as Benton REA's 512kbps/2.0Mbps "Starter" package (Benton REA, "Internet Service Pricing"). This becomes more of a problem when multiple people must participate in video conferences over the same connection, as is usually the case in households with children attending online classes. Thankfully, recent improvements to Benton REA's PowerNET infrastructure have increased speeds and reduced prices for businesses and the community (Benton REA, "PowerNET Upgrades Internet Speeds"). Continuing to invest in similar improvements would be a helpful way to assist the community in a time when our lives and businesses revolve around the Internet.

The pandemic has posed many problems with no easy solutions. However, the technological nature of these perplexing pandemic problems perfectly positions Internet providers like Benton REA to make a difference for local businesses and communities by using influence and telecommunications expertise to help those who are struggling.

Works Cited

- Bartik, Alexander W., et al. "The Impact of COVID-19 on Small Business Outcomes and Expectations." *PNAS*, National Academy of Sciences, 28 July 2020, www.pnas.org/content/117/30/17656.
- Benton REA. "Internet Service Pricing & FAQs: High Speed Internet from Benton REA." *Benton REA*, Benton REA, 15 Jan. 2020, bentonrea.org/internet/internet-pricing-and-faqs/.
- Benton REA. "Options for Paying Your Internet Bill: Pay Your PowerNET Bill Online." *Benton REA*, Benton REA, 14 Oct. 2020, bentonrea.org/tools-2/powernet-payment-options/.
- Benton REA. "PowerNET Upgrades Internet Speeds." *Benton REA*, Benton REA, 15 May 2018, bentonrea.org/powernet-upgrades-internet-speeds/.
- Cramer, Maria, and Mihir Zaveri. "What If You Don't Want to Go Back to the Office?" *The New York Times*, The New York Times, 5 May 2020, www.nytimes.com/2020/05/05/business/pandemic-work-from-home-coronavirus.html.
- Warren, Tom. "Zoom Faces a Privacy and Security Backlash as It Surges in Popularity." *The Verge*, The Verge, 1 Apr. 2020, www.theverge.com/2020/4/1/21202584/zoom-security-privacy-issues-video-conferencing-software-coronavirus-demand-response.

Zoom. "System Requirements for Windows, MacOS, and Linux." *Zoom Help Center*, Zoom, support.zoom.us/hc/en-us/articles/201362023-System-requirements-for-Windows-macOS-and-Linux.

Zoom. "Video Conferencing, Web Conferencing, Webinars, Screen Sharing." *Zoom Video*, Zoom, zoom.us/security.