

Mike O'Connor, a former Coopers & Lybrand consultant who runs a high-speed Internet service in St. Paul, is one of US West's more vocal customers. Indeed, last March when US West appeared to back away from a commitment to deploy some of the latest technology throughout the Twin Cities, O'Connor stirred up such a fuss on the Internet that the company agreed to make it available early next year. Now he has some advice for whomever is chosen to replace Ron James as chief executive in Minnesota.

U S West could do much to improve service in state

A letter to the next head of U S West Minnesota

To whom it may concern:

Congratulations on being named the new leader of U S West's Minnesota operation. I know you didn't ask, but since it seems to be my role to periodically poke a stick in your eye, I thought I'd introduce myself with a few ideas on how you might want to approach your job.

► I hope you are really into running a phone company.

Phone companies are neat, right? I figure a really fast-switched telecommunications network (a.k.a. "a phone company") should be pretty fascinating to the person who runs the outfit. I hope you're a crazed geek who gets wild-eyed and talks late into the night about all the PANS (pretty amazing new stuff) that's coming. Don't tell me you're into running an entertainment complex, or cable TV operations or eastern European cellular phone companies. Please! Leave that to others. You'll be crummy at it.

► I hope you're willing to fight for all of Minnesota.

Your company is getting out of the non-urban telephone business as quickly as it can without annoying the Public Utilities Commission. Yet Minnesota's rural "datafication" is going to be a huge factor in the success of our state during the decade to come. I hope you focus U S West Minnesota on all of Minnesota.

While you're at it, you might consider the wild idea of having U S West sell U S West Minnesota to AmeriTech. They're the much better-run, and more regionally focused, outfit that serves Wisconsin, our neighbor to the East. Heck, getting to AmeriTech's headquarters in Chicago should be a lot easier commute for you than having to haul off to Denver's horrible new airport every week.

► I hope you are into community instead of rules and regulations.

The Industrial Revolution



About the author

Mike O'Connor is president of gofast.net Inc., a Twin Cities-based Internet provider that specializes in a high-speed telecom technology called "integrated services digital network" or ISDN. O'Connor has been an MIS director, was associate vice president of the University of Minnesota and worked as a systems analyst for the accounting and consulting firm of Coopers & Lybrand (<http://gofast.net>).

spawned pigeonholes, procedures, timeclocks and bureaucracy. Your company seems to be taking this to extremes these days, led by your regulatory lawyers and finance people.

Meanwhile, the Information Revolution is moving us lickety-split toward relying on personal relationships in which we turn to people we know and trust when we want to get things done. As you lead U S West Minnesota in the undertaking of helping to build tomorrow's global village, I hope you do so by being the "wise elder" and builder-of-communities, not a bookkeeper.

► I hope you read Wired magazine.

Now there's a magazine that will help you "get it." I hope you read it because it turns you on, not because you were told to by the marketing department. You've never heard of Wired magazine? Uh oh. Have you heard of the marketing department? My people will call your people. We've got to talk.

► Have you been inoculated against management fads?

Your current management team has seriously damaged the morale and delivery capability of what was once a fine company. All in the name of "reengineering" — a not-too-bad concept embodied in a terrible book.

You've got to do something about this — the future of your company, and our state, is at stake.

Get back to Deming. Remove fear and waste. Trust your employees to take care of customers — they will, if you treat them like grownups. Stop the mass layoffs and reshuffles. We shareholders won't mind if you are a little less profitable.

Move your company out of the cellar on delivering value to customers. Your alternative, keeping on the current track, is likely to result in losing most of your customers to the first capable competitor that shows up on the scene. Trust me on this one. I'll lead the charge.

► I hope you can lighten people up a little bit.

Remember, no matter how bad it gets, your job's not brain surgery. Nobody will die if you make a mistake or two. It's even all right to say "we goofed" out loud every once in a while. Your customers will appreciate the honesty, and your employees will reward you with a little more trust. You've got nowhere to go but up on this front.

This job you're about to get should be fun — but there are lots of people inside your company who disagree with me on this. It's your mission, should you care to accept it, to get them to loosen up.

Welcome to your new position. We the citizens of the state are counting on you to do your part in building the infrastructure we all need. Heck, we'll even help you, if you let us. We need you with us on this. Don't let us down.

Best regards,
Mike O'Connor



Got an opinion?

What are your views on this week's comments by Mike O'Connor?

Or do you have opinions on other columns or articles that have appeared in the Business section?

Call 673-9071 and let us know what you think. Please leave your name, company, title and daytime phone number. Or you may fax us your opinion at 673-7122.

Commentary

On Dec. 18, Mike O'Connor, a former Coopers & Lybrand consultant who runs a high-speed Internet service in St. Paul, wrote an open letter to whomever would be named to replace Ron James as U S West's chief executive in Minnesota saying he should be a reader of "Wired" magazine, get inoculated against management fads and lighten up a little bit. Today, Jim Smiley, U S West's new vice president-Minnesota, responds.

New U S West-Minnesota head pledges good service

Jim Smiley says he appreciates suggestions for phone company

Dear Mike O'Connor:

Your letter was waiting for me when I arrived in Minnesota. In it you offered congratulations and advice for me in my new role as vice president for U S West's operations in Minnesota. You also mentioned it was your role to "periodically poke a stick" in my eye.

Your words of welcome were appreciated and I enjoyed hearing your views. I assure you, and all U S West customers, that I am, as you put it, "into running a phone company." To me, that means following through on our top priority, which is, and has always been, providing high-quality service to our customers.

You raised several areas I would like to address:

► For U S West, reengineering was imperative to replace outmoded service delivery systems and ensure we can provide high quality service to our customers in the future. Consolidating work from 560 centers throughout our 14-state region into 26 centers and bringing new systems on line was a tremendous undertaking. Yes, the transition caused us some difficulties. However, all of our centers, including four in the Twin Cities, are now open and functioning smoothly.

► In addition to managing a massive reengineering effort, we also faced the challenge of explosive growth in the demand for customer lines — particularly for second telephone lines. In 1994, we added a record 52,000 telephone access lines in Minnesota. In 1995, we exceeded 1994's growth rate by almost 70 percent and added 88,000 access lines.

► We own up to the fact that these unique factors, reengineering and dramatic growth, caused problems for us. While the vast majority of our customers continued to receive high quality and timely service, in a couple of areas our service levels dropped below what we consider to be acceptable. We took aggressive actions to address these problems and have made significant im-

sense for all parties involved and certainly does not represent an abandonment of our rural areas.

► While I may not be a "crazed geek," I do read "Wired" magazine when I have the chance, and I regularly surf the Net.

► Your letter said, "I hope you are into community." I am. More importantly, U S West employees have a long tradition of volunteering their time to enhance the quality of life in the communities where we live and work. In the Twin Cities, hundreds of employees, both active and retired, participate on U S West Community Service Teams. This past year, these teams completed over 125 different projects with employees volunteering thousands of hours of their time. U S West also supports our Minnesota communities through annual financial contributions of about \$2.5 million.

► Finally, you advised those of us at U S West to "lighten up." your suggestion brought a smile to my face (I'm not called Jim Smiley for nothing) and I will do my best to pass it on.

In closing, all of us at U S West are working hard to be the best communications company we can be and to give each of our customers the high quality of service they have come to expect of us. We have a solid 100-year tradition of doing just that.

Thank you for your views. Perhaps we can continue this dialogue in person in the near future.

*Sincerely,
Jim Smiley*



About the author

Jim Smiley was appointed U S West's vice president-Minnesota in January. He also has leadership responsibilities for the company's public policy operations in Iowa and Nebraska. Before taking over in Minnesota, Smiley, 46, was vice president for congressional relations for U S West. He joined U S West in 1971 as an editorial associate in Seattle, and has since held positions in human resources, public relations, external affairs and was vice president for U S West in South Dakota.