



With over 100 years of history, Farmers Telephone has grown with the changes in technology and the growth of their community. Rebranded and operating as FTI WIFI, they offer high speed internet, video, cell-service and home security to their growing community in southern Colorado.

We spoke with CEO Bill Blackford to hear his answers to 7 Burning Broadband Questions.

Who are your customers, and how do they use high-speed fiber?

Our customers range from farmers and ranchers who've lived here for generations, to newer folks moving in looking for a more self-sufficient lifestyle. Historically, this community came together to solve the challenge of rural communication—people used to ride 20 miles just to make a phone call. Now, with high-speed fiber, those same families can run farms, work remotely, raise their kids with access to online education, and even support small businesses from their homes. It's a diverse mix, but all rely on that connectivity to stay rooted here.

We have a Community College in the area, people working remotely, families connecting with their loved ones, and we focus on remembering that these are lives that we are connecting

What does your team do to modernize your customer experience?

Internally, we are in the process of implementing an operating system to align our values and operations across every touchpoint. This journey has brought into focus our core values, which impact how we operate as a company and the customer experience.

We can't always beat you on price or on speed, but we can beat you on the customer experience and our ability to adapt and respond quickly to needs. As a local provider, we differentiate ourselves through rapid response times—often same-day installs—and 24/7/365 technical support, even for residential customers. Calls are answered locally, and if missed, always returned promptly. Our agility and customer-first mindset make us "local Wi-Fi first responders."

Customers receive a welcome letter with a survey link after any service interaction (excluding billing), and we actively encourage Google reviews for those with a positive experience.

How do you handle competition?

I've always had this vision of marketing from an experience standpoint, not just on speed and price. We focus on offering great customer service and building strong relationships with our customers, which is key to standing out in a crowded market. We came out with next generation wireless technology, our Wi-Fiber, which gives us the ability to provide fiber-like services with high speeds at affordable prices, especially in rural areas. Wi-Fiber really allows us to market that we can offer you fiber-like services, but we can do it immediately and we can do it at a price point that is very reasonable for most people, especially in the rural area.

What has been your strategy for expansion? What tools are you using to support your goals?

Our approach to expansion has been rooted in staying open and adaptable. Coming from the world of large national corporations, I saw how their rigid thinking and need for scalable, one-size-fits-all solutions often held them back. In contrast, being a smaller company allows us to be nimble, like a frigate compared to a battleship, able to pivot quickly, adopt new technologies, and respond to customer needs in real time. That openness has led us to pursue opportunities others might overlook, such as joining Open Access networks, which in turn sparked key partnerships.

By staying curious, willing to say 'I don't know everything,' and embracing both fiber and wireless where they fit best, we've been able to grow in ways that are both strategic and responsive to real-world demands. This approach has allowed us to break free from like this industry mindset that sometimes bogs us down, where the WISPs say it's all wireless and the fiber companies say it's all fiber. But we like to say they're both pretty good depending on where you employ them.

Can you talk more about what you are looking for in expansion?

We start by listening to what our customers are saying, or seeing if there is there a need. Even though our core focus has always been on building a better community and serving the needs of our neighbors, expansion still has to make sense from a business perspective. We're not just chasing profits, but we do have to be thoughtful about the choices we make.

We've begun to offer cell service, but initially we were hesitant because it seemed like a new shiny thing. Did we really want to be involved in all of that? We saw the decline of traditional phone services and all of these people that still need a phone. So why not? We've had enough interest, so let's do it.

When we look at expanding, we ask ourselves: is there real community interest? Can we do this in a way that supports our values but also keeps the organization healthy? If the answer is yes to both, then it's worth pursuing.

Can you walk us through the process of finding a Billing & Subscriber Management Platform?

When I stepped in the door, I recognized areas without defined organization or structure. One area was the BSS/OSS system that was being used. Although it functioned, it was very archaic in the way that everything had to be manually interacted with. If you wanted a report, you pretty much had to go and pull it manually. It took a long time to train people. I very quickly saw opportunities for improvement: efficiencies, organization, structure, culture, all kinds of stuff. I had a laundry list of a thousand items, and I had to narrow that down. I wondered what could effectively change quickly, and I felt like the foundation to all of that was the BSS/OSS system.

After meeting with Innovative Systems, I quickly realized that you offer exactly what I'm looking for. I did a little shopping around with some other businesses, but about a year later we did a demo and walked through the offerings. As a provider you want everything- you can't always have everything, but it was as close to everything that I was looking for. And then more importantly, it was the authentic relationship aspect.



Why do you do what you do?

The core of what we do is about putting that character into place so that we're building something that will live on forever. We've been a company that's survived 105 years. How do we ensure that we build something really special that survives another 105 years? Whatever that looks like, the point is: what is the purpose behind what we're trying to accomplish? As long as this organization exists well after I die, that's success. And as long as employees are having fun, feeling rewarded, and having purpose—we've done something right. We get to come to work with purpose, meaning, and connections, feel rewarded, and build something special that will continue to live on—something bigger than ourselves.





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