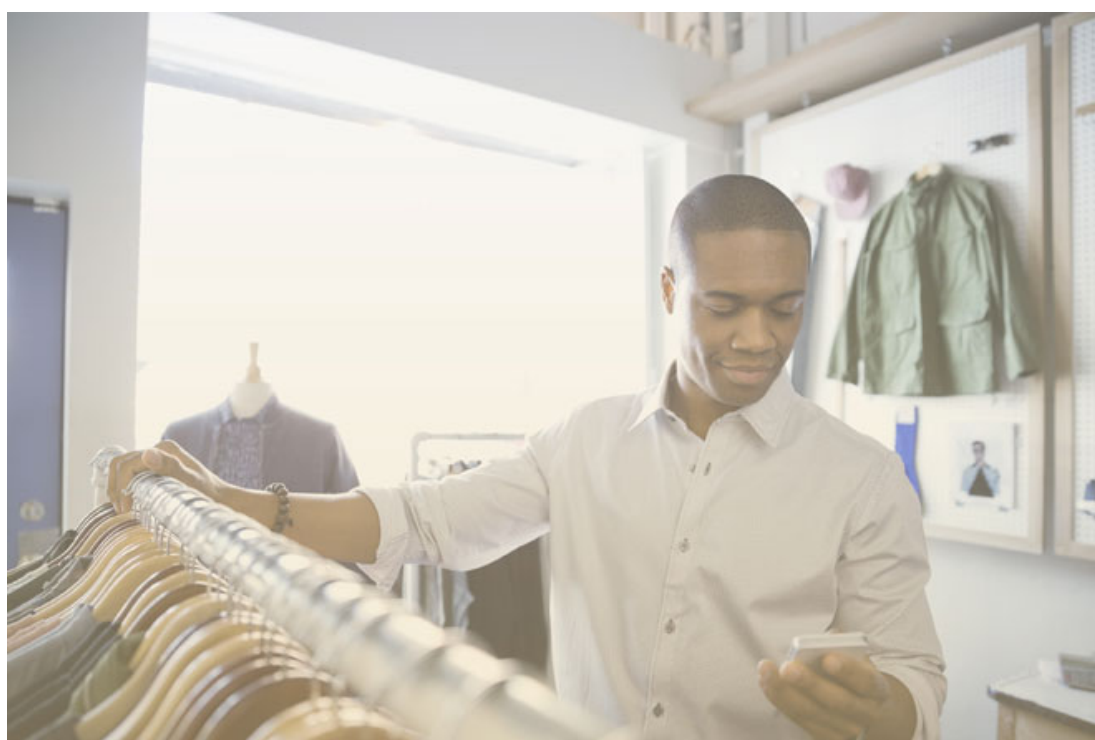


SD-WAN Solutions for Retail Enable Greater Business Flexibility



By EVAN WADE - Contributor

How many times has technology transformed retail's front- and back-end operations? In the past few decades, sellers have had to contend with e-commerce, big data, cloud technology, mobile technology, social media, the IoT, and numerous other disrupters. All of this change has made retailers wary of any new must-have advancements.



If your organization includes locations in urban, suburban, and rural places, SD-WAN solutions for retail can provide uniform quality of service.

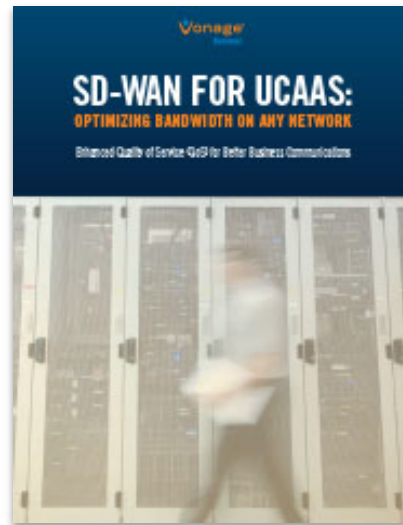
Even so, SD-WAN is one technology that's definitely worth a look. At a high level, SD-WAN solutions for retail bring considerable optimization to a retailer's network traffic, allowing it to make decisions and deploy changes that may have previously been beyond its grasp. For an industry with baked-in distribution, this could open the door to enhanced cloud tools, better communication solutions, or decreased per-location bandwidth bills — or all three.

Opportunities and Challenges for Distributed Retailers

Cloud-based solutions have usurped older tools everywhere in retail, an advancement that unifies an organization more than ever but places greater emphasis on IT resources in the process. If you want to harness everything cloud solutions offer, you'd better be able to pay for the bandwidth they require and make it available across your locations.

Those last three words — "across your locations" — are of particular concern for distributed retailers. While shops in major metro areas may have access to high-end broadband tools, what about the stores in more rural locations? Is it worth migrating to expensive private-circuit solutions to ensure every store has the same tools and reporting capabilities? Is that even an option?

Another worry is that the tools deployed by individual retail shops often require consistent network connectivity. Even a brief period of downtime can wreak havoc on the larger organization's ability to track inventory, create documentation, and process sales — a weakness that can manifest everywhere from daily metric reporting to quarterly tax time.



Optimizing Bandwidth on Any Network

A strong network is an essential component of a UCaaS solution. Here's how SD-WAN can work for you.

SD-WAN Solutions and Retail Business Communications

Consider cloud business communication solutions, a widely used class of tools among retailers, to see how SD-WAN can help with connectivity problems. Because real-time communications place larger-than-usual demands on a network and require availability and consistency, they provide an excellent example of what SD-WAN can do.

If a retailer operates in a number of urban, suburban, and rural areas, it may use a phone branch exchange (PBX) solution, with each store working with a regional communication provider to obtain service. Inconsistent broadband options across stores make this necessary. While the urban stores are near consumer and business-class broadband providers, many of the rural locations are stuck with limited options. What's more, it can be expensive and logistically challenging to get an on-site technician to these locations.

Because of these conditions, maintaining a consistent phone presence — an important part of the overall experience — is expensive and often complex. Fixing errors in the exchange can result in finger-pointing from regional providers. Similarly, though certain stores have cutting-edge cloud-based metric reporting and inventory tracking tools, rural stores may not have the available bandwidth resources.

Reduce Cost and Complexity

SD-WAN addresses bandwidth concerns in numerous ways. Increased bandwidth efficiency allows the retailer to shed its regional providers in favor of a singular, centralized cloud communications vendor, paving the way to reduced costs and less complexity. Suddenly, the organization's bookkeepers only have to pay one bill for phone service, while the company's IT team only needs to call one vendor in the event of a problem or technical question.

Taking the idea of savings further, imagine the company previously had many of its locations on a private circuit for data connectivity. Because many SD-WAN solutions for retail check the box for favorable communications conditions and squeeze better performance from internet bandwidth, the company may be able to move toward commercial broadband products, saving hundreds of dollars per location every month.

SD-WAN represents three high-level benefits any seller would seek out independently: cost savings, enhanced opportunity, and increased reliability and performance.

Enable Consistency and Interoperability

SD-WAN tools can also address questions of consistency. With cloud communications, point of sale, and other retail tools requiring constant uptime, solutions that hop between networks to provide a consistent measure of performance are inherently valuable to a distributed model like retail. This is especially true when many tools can get adequate performance from backup solutions that are normally anything but, like LTE connectivity.

Lean IT teams may find it challenging to make a new branch location's legacy equipment play nicely with existing WAN infrastructure. This is another area in which SD-WAN solutions can come in handy by enabling timely interim access to retail applications. SD-WAN helps keep costs under control while also affording retailers greater flexibility in managing business growth. It can also prove valuable if a retailer decides to open a pop-up site, as it allows IT to quickly and easily tap a range of connectivity options, including broadband, Wi-Fi, or cellular links.

SD-WAN also enables policy-based remote configuration, making it far easier and more cost-effective for IT to join retail branches or pop-up sites to the WAN and to give employees in those locations access to the same corporate applications their colleagues in urban areas already enjoy. These tasks can be accomplished from afar, ensuring a higher standard of technical support as well as a more consistent level of network performance for all locations.

The Compelling Case for SD-WAN in Retail

As recent history shows, retail is more sensitive than most verticals to the wave of technological advancement. That makes a technology that provides so many perks in so many areas an attractive proposition. Instead of forcing retailers into new channels, SD-WAN

represents three high-level benefits any seller would seek out independently: cost savings, enhanced opportunity, and increased reliability and performance. As any retail decision-maker will tell you, that kind of technological change is always welcome.