Heartland

IS IT TIME TO UPGRADE YOUR NETWORK? PUBLIC AND PRIVATE WI-FI

Question: Can my network handle public Wi-Fi?
Consumers want internet access wherever they go—including your restaurant. Is your business prepared to handle both public and private Wi-Fi simultaneously? If not, don't be alarmed. You have options.

Option #1: Setup public Wi-Fi yourself using your existing hardware. If you own a business-class router, chances are you already have public Wi-Fi capability. With multiple SSID's you can segregate your private applications from public Wi-Fi and assign different security requirements. Even some small-scale office routers have guest network capability. For security purposes, however, make sure your router offers WPA2 security, introduced in 2010. Any security older than WPA2 will leave your network exposed to tampering. Also, be sure you keep abreast of update requirements, as technology changes at a rapid pace. The bad guys are always looking for new ways to access your business and customer data.

Option #2: Purchase specialized wireless hardware. Specialized wireless devices typically offer more applications for controlling access to Public Wi-Fi. For example, you can create a Terms of Service page for users to accept prior to accessing the internet. This captive portal feature can also be used to create a "splash page" to help you connect with customers. Other useful applications you might look for are time limits and bandwidth controls, to keep your customers from draining too much of your Wi-Fi. Be sure you or a staff member has the ability to keep up with the settings and changes as you add new devices and applications.

Option #3: Find a Managed Network Service that fits your business. This type of service offers both the security elements and control applications from the first two options, but is also designed for monitoring your network usage. The monitoring component can be useful for identifying bandwidth that is being drained by your customers and spotting suspicious activity on your network. If you purchase this service, make sure you find a firm that utilizes wireless mesh technology. This allows for easy network traffic transition between Access Points (especially important for bigger sites).

Option #4: Setup a dedicated broadband connection for your public Wi-Fi. Keeping your

public Wi-Fi physically separated from your business network is a simple, effective way to segregate your public Wi-Fi from the rest of your network and assign more bandwidth to the users. Of course, it is probably the most expensive option and you still need to enable protection for your users.

Remember, public Wi-Fi isn't just about keeping up with the times or bowing to the wishes of consumers. It's about making a safe connection (no pun intended) and enhancing your relationship with each customer. Don't miss out on the opportunity.

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