

Siemon Infrastructure Supports Chico's Growth



Photography by Seth Barlow

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Established in 1983, Chico's began in as a small store on Sanibel Island, Florida selling Mexican folk art and cotton sweaters. Chico's successful style, quality and reputation for individualized customer service soon led to the franchising of dozens of new stores targeting the upscale clothing market for women ages 40-65.

Since its establishment in 1983, Chico's has experienced strong, continued growth. In 1989, Chico's expanded in the direction of wholly owned subsidiaries. In 1993, with 75 stores, Chico's went public on the NASDAQ, and by April, 2001, Chico's FAS, Inc. had grown to 259 stores and moved to the NYSE (symbol CHS). More recently, while the Standard & Poor's Retailing Index experienced a near 18 percent drop, Chico's shares gained over 60 percent in 2002 on revenue growth of over 40%... among the highest in the nation's retail sector.

Today, with annual sales exceeding a half billion dollars (\$531 million FY 2002), Chico's is firmly established as a specialty retailer of exclusively designed, private label, sophisticated, casual-to-dressy clothing, complementary accessories and other non-clothing gift items. Now with 375 stores in 41 states, Chico's is reinforcing its corporate infrastructure to open 65 additional stores in 2003, while aggressively launching a new brand with its new Pazo stores serving the emerging female ages 25-to-35 market niche.

NEW FACILITIES TO MEET CONTINUED GROWTH

Following its successful initial public stock offering, Chico's acquired a 40-acre corporate campus site in Fort Myers, Florida, and constructed a 50,000 square foot corporate office building and 80,000 square foot distribution center. By 1999, they had outgrown both. Since then, Chico's facilities have been undergoing a continuous metamorphosis. In 2000, Chico's added 30,000 square feet to its corporate headquarters. Once completed, the original corporate offices were renovated as well. In 2002, Chico's

relocated its distribution warehouse to a new 200,000 square-foot location in Winder, Georgia, and is currently converting the original Ft. Myers warehouse to offices and design studios.



Ensuring that Chico's information systems and network infrastructure support growth, change and increasing demands for bandwidth and reliability are Mike Crooks, Manager of Network Operations, Adjit Patel, Chief Information Technology Officer, and Dave Ziel, Vice President of Construction.

In 1999, these managers enlisted the support of Fiber Solutions, Inc. of Fort Myers to define and identify the infrastructure design elements most adaptable to both foreseeable and unforeseeable change. Fiber Solutions' plan included The Siemon Company's category 6 cabling system as the solution of choice to meet Chico's expanding needs. "Fiber Solutions was on the leading edge, promoting the new standards," said Crooks, "and timing was right for Siemon, whose Cat 6, 250 MHz connectivity was several years ahead of others in the industry. Siemon was also able to meet our stocking requirements well in advance of Cat 6 ratification." Fiber Solutions' Siemon-certified system came with a 20-year

warranty, nearly double the 10-12 year life expectancy of existing industry standards.

Fiber Solutions conducted independent testing to determine the best combination of Siemon components and cabling manufacturers to support the Cat 6, 250 MHz application. "Chico's came to us with requirements for the most up-to-date technology available," said Rodney Lavoie, President and Founder of Fiber Solutions. "We set up mock networks with Siemon hardware and tested different cabling manufacturers to see what gave us the best installation and the most head-room. Based on these results, we selected Siemon components, Berk-Tek Category 6 cabling and Corning fiber."

UNIQUE OPEN ARCHITECTURE

Chico's open architecture, envisioned by founder Marvin Gralnick, called for open ceilings, with all visible support structures and ceiling-mounted fixtures to be painted a special metallic silver. Fiber Solutions met this challenge for its 2000 debut in the first 30,000 square foot corporate expansion." We purchased white Valcom pendant paging speakers, found the paint supplier, matched the paint code, took every speaker apart, built a temporary spray booth in our shop, painted each speaker and put them all back together," said Lavoie. The end result was a neat, esthetically pleasing paging system that blended into the ceiling space, fully compliant to both TIA/EIA and Siemon Cabling System standards.

Fiber Solutions devised and installed a new standard fiber-to-desktop drop configuration; with each work station getting three category 6 drops using Siemon MT-RJ (mini termination in registered jack) high performance fiber optic adapters for easy mounting. Drops were terminated in Siemon modular furniture faceplates. Siemon equipment racks were installed in all Main Cross-Connect (MC) and Intermediate Telecommunication Room (TR) locations.

MUTOA

The key advantage of a MUTOA is that it provides a completely modular solution for work area changes. Since there is no horizontal cable to re-run, the office layout can be easily changed with minimum expense. It provides customers easy access and makes work area changes as simple as plugging an equipment cord into an outlet.



Siemon's FOB fiber outlet boxes, with a larger faceplate design, allowed greater fiber slack storage, improving potential flexibility for future applications.

Once completed, the original Ft. Myers office space was retrofitted in 2001. "It was hard to convince management to rewire a building only seven years old," said Mike Crooks, "but the old Cat 5 hadn't been installed by a certified cabling contractor." Helping to make the case was Dave Ziel, who oversees all of the construction for Chico's. "Dave has been especially instrumental in integrating cabling with every stage of the master construction plan," said Crooks.

To minimize disruption of employees using existing (Cat 5) cabling, Fiber Solutions installed a temporary network across the tops of the modular Herman Miller Ethospace furniture while gutting the floor-recessed walker duct to prepare for the permanent installation. Siemon's MAX® jacks and adapter plates designed specially for this particular furniture, added a reliable and attractive finishing touch.

DISTRIBUTION WAREHOUSE RELOCATION

In May, 2002, Chico's acquired a distribution warehouse in Winder, Georgia encompassing 200,000 square feet of open floor space punctuated by vertical columns. The large expanse of

open space required an innovative solution in order to provide total coverage while keeping stations within the 295-foot maximum cable length.

Fiber Solutions personnel traveled the 600 miles to Winder. Lodged locally over a two-month period, installers mounted B-line cabinets directly onto the vertical columns in six strategic placements, installing redundant fiber rings among the two enclosed (TR) locations and all column-mounted cabinets. "Rodney's team were under a lot of pressure to implement this critical phase of our strategic growth plans," said Crooks. "Fiber Solutions put out 110 percent and delivered a fully operational, fully warranted 300-drop installation under very short time constraints."

Each Cisco switch supported a pair of redundant fiber backbone connections, making fiber to the desktop unnecessary, and four Cat 6 cables per station were installed. Outlets, once installed, could be used for either voice or data using an ordinary RJ-45 patch cable. Within months the facility had grown to nearly 400 drops and 150 employees at the site. "There is a lot of infrastructure for growth in Winder," said Crooks. "As production expands, we realize progressively greater benefits of automated bar code readers, RF devices, wristband computers, wireless terminals and other devices connected to wireless hubs on the network." Fiber Solutions continues to perform moves, adds and changes in Winder as the distribution floor optimizes for ever-improving efficiency. The distribution center operated in tandem with network facilities in Ft. Myers until cutover in February, 2003.

The Siemon Company and Fiber Solutions, Inc. are among a prestigious list of strategic partners to Chico's, partners keeping Chico's implementations technologically current. Also allied with Chico's are Sprint Cisco, IBM, Compaq, Nortel and Solarcom, to name a few.

Outside the buildings in Ft. Myers, redundant fiber feeds and a Sprint SONET ring ultimately connect all 375 stores through a Cisco VPN, while a dedicated T-1 connects Ft. Myers corporate facilities to the warehouse distribution operation in Winder. Power redundancy is achieved with one generator backup plus battery backup.

CORPORATE DESIGN CENTER

In Spring 2003, Ft. Myers' former warehouse, vacated during the Winder move, was renovated to complete the cycle, positioning its 80,000 square feet for the promising new Pazo clothing venture. The 550-drop Design Center project included challenges similar to those of the original corporate facility, including open ceilings,

open cable trays, and three separate telecommunications rooms. Fiber Solutions employed the corporate office drop configuration of three Berk-Tek Cat 6 and one Corning fiber cable with Siemon MT-RJ terminations. Fiber Solutions specified and wall-mounted Siemon's S210 Towers systems - 250-Mhz, Cat 6-rated punch-down blocks for both data and voice. Equipment racks carried data cabling while all voice routes traversed open ladder racks. All wall plate locations were installed with MT-RJ connectors as Siemon fiber outlet boxes stored the additional slack fiber required to meet TIA specs.

This space, dedicated to Chico's Design studios, used the same Cat 6 three-pair-plus-fiber drop configuration to support the higher bandwidth demands of its photography, prepress, imagesetting, multimedia and digital video operations. This building also included a combination of Siemon wall outlets, modular furniture, and Multi-User Telecommunications Outlet Assemblies (MUTOA), which serve up to 12 work areas each and allow for frequent workstation reconfiguration. Horizontal cable was brought into each MUTOA and terminated to the back of the work area outlets. Equipment cords plugged into MUTOA outlets were routed through protective modular furniture pathways and later connected to desktop equipment.

INFRASTRUCTURE WITH ROOM TO GROW

Chico's Network and Communication Group, responsible for infrastructure, continues to push the envelope of optimization made available by their Siemon Cabling System infrastructure.

"Continuous monitoring of activity indicates that we still have tremendous headroom, and that we are well-positioned for any demand that is placed upon us," said Mike Crooks. "Even with the design studios and video production requiring higher-than-average bandwidth utilization, we're still not fully taking advantage of our capacity. We've recently been doing alot of (Cisco) software-based departmentalizing with VLANs and subnets to isolate traffic and test switching, routing and firewall performance. "Planning for new contingencies is an everyday happening," said Crooks. "The architectures designed by The Siemon Company and Fiber Solutions are cornerstones that will carry us forward for many years." ▲

About Fiber Solutions

Fiber Solutions, the largest Siemon Certified Installer in Southwestern Florida, founded in 1997, has grown to two locations — Ft. Myers and Naples and over 30 employees. "Every field tech and project manager is certified via the Siemon CI program," said Lavoie, "even our sales manager is Siemon Certified."

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