



Aaron's[®]
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CASE STUDY

Aaron's propels digital-first strategy by migrating to a cloud-delivered branch office approach

Aaron's LLC, a leading omnichannel provider of lease-to-own home furnishings, consumer electronics, and more, dramatically reduced the time to complete a customer lease application and positioned itself for growth with Palo Alto Networks Prisma[®] SD-WAN.

IN BRIEF

Customer

Aaron's, L.L.C.

Industry

Retail

Country

United States of America

Products and Services

Lease-to-own and retail sales of home furnishings, consumer electronics, home appliances, and accessories

Organization Size

9,000+

Website

www.aarons.com

Challenges

- + Unreliable internet connectivity impacts branch operations.
- + Extensive manual operations consume IT staff's time and resources.

Requirements

- + Provide visibility into network-related issues.
- + Prioritize business-critical applications.
- + Enable a backup internet connection.

Solution

Aaron's LLC selects Palo Alto Networks Prisma® SD-WAN, the next-generation SD-WAN solution that delivers speed, lower support costs, and a rich set of security and network services from the cloud, to transform its business operations.

Aaron's, headquartered in Atlanta, Georgia, is a leading omnichannel provider of furniture, consumer electronics, home appliances, and accessories. Its products are available for purchase and lease through 1,300 company-operated and franchised stores in 47 states and Canada, as well as on its e-commerce platform, Aarons.com.

With \$1.7 billion in revenues in 2020 and a customer base representing approximately 30 percent of the U.S. population, executing a digital-first strategy is a chief priority for the company.

"Shopping habits have changed over the years and there are a lot of options out there. Customers have no problem going elsewhere to get what they need if there's a better experience," says Tommy Meek, CIO at Aaron's. "A big focus for Aaron's has been to improve that experience, make it frictionless, and give our customers the capability to shop the way that they want. So much of that relies on technology."

Aaron's has invested in technology that streamlines the customer journey and provides an integrated online and in-store experience.

CHALLENGE

Next-generation SD-WAN is required to deliver uninterrupted store operations

During a period of growth when Aaron's opened new branches quickly, stores struggled with slow WAN connectivity. Employees needed to contact the IT support center responsible for delivering technology support and log trouble tickets far too often. Field leadership reported up the chain about frequent connectivity issues.

It was a challenge for Aaron's to identify the cause of the bandwidth problem, which consumed time and resources. "We just didn't have the visibility to figure out what was going on," Meek recalls. "We had so many team members—engineers and analysts across the organization—trying to get to the bottom of the problem. There are many reasons for the internet to appear slow but at the end of the day, it didn't matter to our stores why it was slow."

IT leadership envisioned a transformative solution and a more agile infrastructure. As a key part of this, they sought to transition the company's remote offices to the cloud using a software-defined wide area network (SD-WAN) solution.

REQUIREMENTS

Achieving strong service and growth requires a reliable, intuitive solution

Aaron's sought a solution that would enable it to deliver best-in-class services. The company had three primary reasons for choosing SD-WAN:

- IT staff required better visibility and insight into the cause of any perceived network internet latency or other network-related issues.
- Aaron's needed the ability to prioritize business-critical applications in all stores to avoid disruptions and to support normal operations.
- The business wanted a secondary backup internet connection in each location for failover capabilities.

Aaron's has a lean IT staff so it required a solution that would be easy to use and centrally managed. The ideal solution would have autonomous capabilities (for example, using machine learning to self-correct and avoid network failures). This would benefit not only IT, but also store employees. "Over the years, we've tried to reduce the need for support. We're opting for solutions that either don't break, or even self-heal," Meek says.



SOLUTION

Rollout completed in half the expected time thanks to a close-knit partnership

Palo Alto Networks Prisma SD-WAN was the right choice. The product offered features that were extremely important to Aaron's and helped address the three fundamental challenges that the company needed to solve.

Because Prisma SD-WAN is built with Layer 7 intelligence, Aaron's was able to gain application visibility and control. In addition, it predictively identifies issues before they occur and takes corrective action automatically. This not only improves uptime but reduces the administrative burden for IT teams.

Moreover, Prisma SD-WAN enables the cloud-delivered branch. By enabling branch services to be delivered from the cloud, such as networking and security, Aaron's can simplify management and increase return on investment. Plus, it can scale rapidly and globally to support thousands of branch offices and remote users.

The initial rollout was completed in half the time Aaron's anticipated. Altogether, it took less than 18 months, including a pilot. Following the initial rollout, Aaron's immediately deployed a secondary internet connection for all its stores. "Rollout occurred quickly because of the strong partnership we have with Palo Alto Networks," Meek states. "They connected to us closely."

Aligned with its cloud strategy, Aaron's is leveraging Palo Alto Networks to move its branch IT infrastructure to a cloud-delivered model rather than adding hardware. The move has enabled Aaron's IT staff to migrate additional on-premises technologies, like the migration of Microsoft® Exchange to Office 365™, providing a better user experience for employees and customers.



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— Tommy Meek, Chief Information Officer, Aaron's

BENEFITS

Industry-leading solution empowers employees and makes customers happy

Deploying Palo Alto Networks Prisma SD-WAN has helped Aaron's to transform business operations at the store level and boost its IT team's productivity. Through its partnership with Palo Alto Networks, the company achieved its goal of building a more agile infrastructure capable of supporting rapid deployment.

Sluggish internet connectivity has been replaced by strong performance leading to exceptional user experience.

The company has experienced a 99 percent reduction of trouble tickets for the WAN, shrinking from an average of 3,000 per month to 30.

The change has allowed Aaron's to use technology to provide the best customer experience. "We don't want the stores to be an extension of the IT staff. We want them to focus on their primary job," says Meek. "The more we can design technology solutions that make it seamless or faster for stores to do their job, the better our employees' experience is going to be. And, in turn, the better our customers' experience will be."

Prisma SD-WAN enabled the company to reduce latency at all branches. It has improved application performance and ensures backup connectivity across branches. The company has also increased remote location availability, helping ensure business continuity.



The Prisma® SD-WAN solution helped us get the network right. It helped us make sure that we're prioritizing business-critical traffic. And it helped us have that visibility into knowing when there are issues, where to go to fix them.

— Tommy Meek, Chief Information Officer, Aaron's

An added benefit is the ability to aggregate data from stores in real time. With deep analytics, the company can better serve its branches. Prisma SD-WAN has also substantially streamlined work for the IT team, allowing it to better support business goals while being more productive. IT can manage network configuration and policies simply and from one intuitive platform. The team can implement network policies that align with business priorities. Now that IT has more confidence in its infrastructure, it can focus on other areas of the business and roll out technology solutions without having to babysit the network.

Today, the IT team can deploy point of sale systems to all 1,300 locations in 27 minutes. Updates to branch offices can be deployed just as quickly—an innovation that helps the company stay ahead of the game. Utilizing Prisma SD-WAN's API-based platform, CloudBlades™, the IT team accelerated deployments to as many as 100 stores per week.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, Aaron's rolled out new technology to support its customer lease agreement. Previously, completing the lease agreement was a 45-minute, pen-and-paper, manual process. Today, it's completed on a tablet and only takes about 10 or 15 minutes.

"As you can imagine, our customers really love that," Meek enthuses. "We couldn't have accomplished it without building the underlying infrastructure and solidifying the performance of the network. That's where the Prisma SD-WAN solution helped us. It helped us get the network right. It helped us make sure that we're prioritizing business-critical traffic. And it helped us have that visibility into knowing when there are issues, where to go to fix them. There are partners and there are vendors. Palo Alto Networks has truly been a partner for us and helped solve this challenge."

Business is digitally enhanced and positioned for the future

Thanks to Palo Alto Networks Prisma SD-WAN, Aaron's has modernized its branch office infrastructure and is set up to scale. It has made tremendous strides in its digital transformation; Meek says he's "incredibly proud."

Most importantly, the company is primed to continue on that journey and accelerate its priorities of simplifying and digitizing the customer experience.

Find out more about how Palo Alto Networks Prisma® SD-WAN can help accelerate opportunities for your organization and support your transition to the cloud.



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