

NOVEMBER/DECEMBER 2022



VTX1 Companies

COMPASS

VOL. 3, NO. 6



Legacy of service

Celebrating Dave Osborn's career



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EMPLOYEE VOLUNTEERISM

TRIMMING THE TREE



By SHIRLEY BLOOMFIELD, CEO
NTCA-The Rural Broadband Association

Rural broadband thrives in 2022

The commitment and professionalism of rural broadband providers creates lasting and substantive improvements, bringing essential services that bridge the gap in internet performance between rural and metropolitan areas. In many cases, NTCA members offer even more robust services than those available in larger cities.

In recent years, Congress has passed billions in funding for rural broadband. I was fortunate to attend a White House ceremony last year for the signing of the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act, which included over \$60 billion for broadband projects.

NTCA has worked to ensure this funding goes to communities that need it most, as well as to providers, such as yours, with a long history of servicing their neighbors with the highest-quality broadband.

While broadband expansion is a priority, we've continued our focus on advocacy, including working with the Federal Communications Commission to ensure the long-term viability of the Universal Service Fund. It's a program that helps Americans in hard-to-serve areas keep pace with services found in more densely populated communities.

We've also expanded our Smart Rural Community program to highlight the great things robust broadband access brings to rural America — it's not just cities that are "smart!" Over 240 providers are part of the program. Visit smartruralcommunity.org for more information.

As we celebrate our wins from this year, we're looking forward to an even better 2023. 📶

TO ALL WHO BRIDGE THE DIGITAL DIVIDE

Thank you

FOR ANOTHER SUCCESSFUL YEAR

Fast internet access is essential for rural communities to thrive in a fast-changing, highly connected world.



High-Speed Internet



Voice Communications



Videoconferencing



Telehealth



Business-level Data Tools



Online Education



Streaming Video & Music

Professionals in your community make this possible — working daily to help you lead a better life.

Thank you for all you do!

Business is booming

Apps help small business owners thrive

Running a small business is no easy task. There's a long list of things to keep track of, from inventory and sales to payroll and budgeting. It can get overwhelming staying ahead of the curve.

Thankfully, there's a wide array of apps geared toward making the life of a small business owner easier. Listed below are some of the best apps in 2022 for small businesses.

POINT OF SALE SYSTEMS

These systems allow small businesses to complete sales and ring up customers. According to NerdWallet, restaurants require POS systems that provide coordination and table management, while a retail store requires inventory management features.

Square — The POS offered by the financial tech company Square meets all these requirements and much more. Square is easy to use, offering transparent pricing, live support and compatibility with iPhone, iPad and Android devices. The first magnetic stripe credit card reader is free, and there is even a free plan available for small businesses that don't require advanced functions. While many payment processors have hidden monthly fees, Square doesn't charge by the month. Instead, you pay 2.6% + 10 cents for each credit card transaction for unlimited devices.

ACCOUNTING AND BUDGETING

Accounting software helps small businesses that may not be able to hire a full-time, in-house accountant. With these apps, you can track profit margins, revenues, expenses and budgets to understand the health of your business.

Intuit QuickBooks — Intuit QuickBooks is the industry standard and leader for small business accounting software in 2022, according to NerdWallet. It offers a multitude of service tiers, so it can easily be scaled to the size of the business it serves. It is accessible anywhere from QuickBooks online to the cloud-based version. Some of QuickBooks' best features include a full suite of reports, double-entry accounting, ease of accessibility and sharing with outside accountants, live service bookkeeping support and easy mobile access. Pricing is \$25 a month with other monthly payment tiers (\$50, \$80 and \$180 respectively).

PAYROLL

Paying employees on time is essential to operating a business. Extra help tracking hours and payments can allow small businesses owners to give attention to many other daily aspects of running their companies.



Patriot Payroll — While there are lots of payroll apps on the market, a majority of them are so high-priced that the cost outweighs the benefit of extra help for smaller companies. Patriot Payroll has an affordable price point — \$10 a month, plus \$4 an employee — while offering the same services and benefits as its more expensive counterparts. These services include a one-month free trial, HR support and coverage for up to 100 employees.

INVENTORY

Tracking inventory is a crucial part of staying ahead of the curve for any business. It is no easy task without help, which is why large corporations dedicate entire teams and extensive software programs just for inventory.

Sortly — With built-in barcode scanning that can track stock across multiple warehouses, Sortly has everything you need to manage inventory on the go. It offers both barcode and QR code scanning, giving you the flexibility to use what works best for your business. It even has an offline mode, so a signal interruption won't slow you down. Keep scanning incoming and outgoing items and seamlessly sync up once you're back online. 🗨️

Annual reflections

Together, we make our community better

As the final days of 2022 unfold and we enter a season of celebration and remembrance, I enjoy the opportunity to reflect on this place we call home and the role of VTX1 Companies.



PATRICK MCDONNELL
Chief Executive Officer

Many of us lead lives where it seems the accelerator is always pushed to the floor. Between raising families, bustling careers, volunteering and embracing active pastimes, everyone is flying through life. But the holidays — while busy in their own way — are a chance to take solace and find respite in traditions like sharing family tall tales, great meals and a few laughs. We might even find quiet moments, if we're lucky.

During these times of reflection, I appreciate a theme that runs through our community — neighbors helping neighbors. In so many ways, these connections are what make rural places like ours special. We rally together in hard times. We celebrate good times. We also embrace the teamwork needed to build for

the future, which is at the core of VTX1 Companies' mission.

I will never forget this company's history or the role it plays within our community. Rather than focusing on stock prices or maximizing profits, VTX1 Companies was created to support our rural areas. When larger companies ignored us, calling our communities too rural and small to be a sound investment, our founders stepped up. It began with telephone lines connecting homes and businesses. But the work did not stop there. Now, we provide a suite of modern communications tools and a fast and dependable internet network that would create envy in many of the largest cities.

This network is not something our leaders and staff created. It was made possible by you and the people you see every day at the grocery store or at school events. An elected board of directors — residents who, just like you, depend on our services — set the standards and long-term goals we strive to achieve. We are a company made up of people devoted to helping their neighbors. Few other communications companies can say the same.

Does that make VTX1 Companies special? Certainly, we're proud of the work we do because it benefits others. However, I fully appreciate that we're far from alone in having a goal of uplifting those around us.

It's this sentiment that also reminds me to appreciate those who served and sacrificed in the name of our nation. Veterans Day is Nov. 11. Please take a few minutes to appreciate the sons and daughters of this community who made the choice to serve. Rural areas like ours have a long history of service to the armed forces, something we should never forget. Truly, are there more profound examples of neighbors helping neighbors?

And during this time of celebration, I must thank everyone who is part of the VTX1 family. Every department — every individual — plays a vital part in bringing you the services you need in this fast-paced world.

From everyone at VTX1 Companies, have a wonderful Thanksgiving and a Merry Christmas.

Sincerely,

Patrick McDonnell
CEO, VTX1 Companies



VTX1 Companies

Contact Us: 1-844-GET-VTX1
(438-8891)

Hours of Operation:

- Business Offices:
Mon.-Fri. • 8 a.m.-5 p.m.
- Customer Service:
Mon.-Fri. • 8 a.m.-7 p.m.
- Technical Support:
Mon.-Sun. • 24/7

Raymondville Corporate Office

881 E. Hidalgo Ave. • Raymondville, TX 78580

Dilley Office

1489 W. FM 117 • Dilley, TX 78017

Falfurrias Office

300 N. St. Mary's St. • Falfurrias, TX 78355

George West Office

510 Bowie St. • George West, TX 78022

Jourdanton Office

511 Main St. • Jourdanton, TX 78026

San Antonio Office

6884 Alamo Downs Pkwy • San Antonio, TX 78238
888-651-6080

Board of Directors:

- Chief Executive Officer — Patrick McDonnell
- District 1 — J.T. Mayo Jr. (Port Mansfield & San Perlita) — VP
- District 2 — George Bennack (Stillman)
- District 3 — Matthew Kiefer (Lasara)
- District 4 — Margie Pollock (Encino & Hargill) — SECRETARY
- District 5 — Dr. Adalberto Garza (San Isidro)
- District 6 — Idalia (Dolly) Villarreal (El Sauz & McCook) — PRESIDENT
- District 7 — Christopher R. Meyer (Annarose & Artesia Wells)
- District 8 — John Barnes (Fowlerton & Millett)
- District 9 — James Mann (San Miguel & Tilden) — RETIRED
- District 10 — Frank Weaver (Concepcion & Miranda City) — TREASURER

Produced for VTX1 by:

Pioneer
UTILITY RESOURCES

On the Cover:



Retired CEO Dave Osborn played a vital role in transforming telephone utilities into cutting-edge communications companies.

See story Page 8.

Remembering our friend, Arline Harris

The VTX1 family wishes to honor former board member Arline Harris of Dilley, who passed away in August. She retired in 2020 after 23 years of serving District 8, Fowlerton and Millett. Arline was first elected to the VTX1 Board of Directors in 1997, running for the seat previously held by her late husband, Fred Harris.

She had a great sense of humor and dry wit. She always seemed to come up with unexpected one-liners. Arline and Fred loved to compete at the Pearsall Bowling Alley with their team, the Fowl Bowlers.

The team's name came from the family egg farm operations she ran. Meanwhile, Fred sold and delivered eggs daily to San Antonio.

Arline loved to play bridge, paint and make ceramics. She was also active with the 4-H Share the Fun Group. As an accomplished singer, she loved teaching kids in the youth choir at the Methodist Church in Dilley. She enjoyed traveling across the United States. The VTX1 family will miss her sense of adventure and pioneering spirit.



The employees of VTX1 are grateful for the support of our loyal members. We hope you enjoy a holiday season filled with family and friends. In observance of the following holidays, our offices will close:

- Thanksgiving:** Thursday, Nov. 24, and Friday, Nov. 25
- Christmas:** Friday, Dec. 23, and Monday, Dec. 26
- New Year's:** Monday, Jan. 2

VTX1 gives back

In support of the Willacy County Young Farmers and the Rio Grande Valley Food Bank, VTX1 recently gave both programs a \$25,000 check. VTX1 also presented \$5,000 checks to the San Isidro Community Club and the E.J. Salinas Community Center.



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Reviews ★★★★★



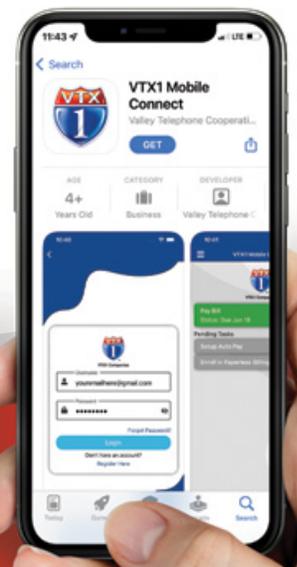
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Don't get your tinsel in a tangle

Story by ANNE BRALY

Decorating the Christmas tree is a beloved holiday tradition, but before you can hang the ornaments, take photos of the grandkids beneath those resplendent boughs or open presents beside it, you've got to find one.

Visiting a Christmas tree farm can put you in the spirit of the season as you make family memories while supporting a local business. And you'll bring home the absolute freshest trees, wreaths and greenery, so everything will last much longer. The fact that Texas isn't overloaded with tree farms makes a trip to a farm to cut down your own tree all the more special for families, says Doug Hingst, owner of Pipe Creek Christmas Trees, who, along with his father, Jim, opened their farm to the public in 1991 after Jim retired. "He was looking for something to do after he retired from the oil business and bought the farm from a friend who had the idea of starting a tree farm. My father took it from there," Doug says.

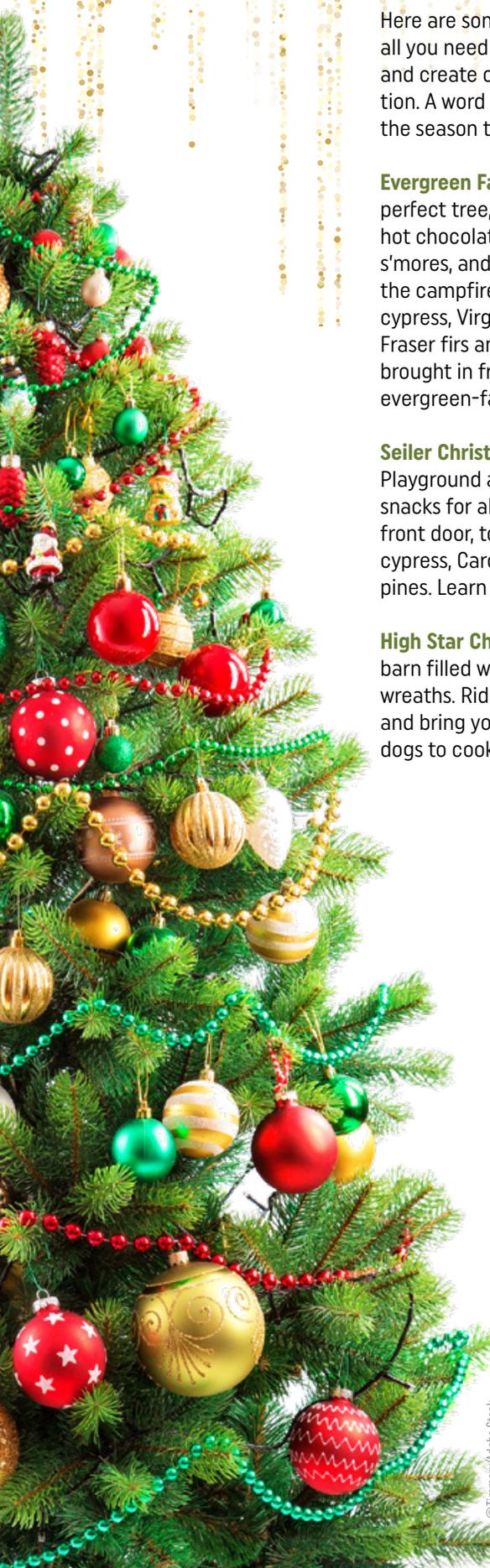
Now, the father-son duo grow two types of trees: Leyland cypress and Afghan pines, both of which grow well in the hot, Texas climate. Doug opens the gates the Monday before Thanksgiving. "People are getting their trees earlier these days," he says, adding that this practice may be trending because people want to extend the holiday season and enjoy their trees for a longer period of time.

Pipe Creek Christmas Trees is a 10-acre farm. It's a long hike when hunting for the perfect tree. That's why taking a hayride out into the fields is a popular option for families. "We see so many of the same people year after year," Doug says. "And now, we're seeing three generations — people who came as kids are now bringing their own children. People are always happy when they come here. They always come with a smile on their faces."



Tree varieties at places like Pipe Creek Christmas Trees may include Afghan pines and Leyland cypress. Precut Fraser firs are also often available.





Tree farms around the Lone Star State

Here are some farms around Texas that provide all you need to cut your own Christmas tree and create or continue a favorite family tradition. A word to the wise: Get your tree early in the season to get your pick of the best.

Evergreen Farms, Elgin — After cutting the perfect tree, visit the concession stand for hot chocolate and snacks. Pick up fixings for s'mores, and then roast your marshmallows by the campfire. Tree varieties include Leyland cypress, Virginia pine and Arizona cypress. Fraser firs and noble firs are precut and brought in from other states. Learn more at evergreen-farms.com.

Seiler Christmas Tree Farm, Seguin — Playground and candy canes for the kids, snacks for all. Take home a live wreath for your front door, too. Tree varieties include Leyland cypress, Carolina Sapphire, Virginia and Loblolly pines. Learn more at seilerschristmastrees.com.

High Star Christmas Tree Farm, Hockley — A barn filled with premade and made-to-order wreaths. Ride on the Merry Tree Express Train, and bring your own marshmallows and hot dogs to cook over the campfire — roasting

sticks provided. There are also hay rides and more fun for the whole family. Tree varieties include Virginia pine, plus precut Fraser and balsam firs. Details at highstarfarm.com.

Elgin Christmas Trees, Elgin — Take a hayride around the farm to pick out the perfect tree. Tag it, cut it and someone else will haul it for you. Kids will enjoy the farm animals. Shop the Christmas Cottage for a wide variety of holiday crafts. Tree varieties include Virginia pine and Leyland cypress. Learn more at elginchristmastreefarm.com.

Pipe Creek Christmas Trees, Pipe Creek — Hayrides on the weekend, and fresh wreaths for sale, too. Tree varieties include Afghan pines and Leyland cypress. Precut Fraser firs are also available. Learn more at pipecreekchristmastrees.com.

Lee County Christmas Trees, Lincoln — Play area for the kids, along with hayrides, hot chocolate and a farm shop filled with ornaments and decorations. Tree varieties include Carolina Sapphire, Virginia pine and Murray cypress. Online at leecountychristmastrees.com. 📱

Keeping your tree fresh

A newly cut Christmas tree is going to be fresher than one that's been sitting on a lot for a while, but it still needs some TLC to last through the holiday season. Here are some tips to make that happen.

- ▲ Start with a healthy, vibrant tree. Be sure to trim any lower limbs or dead branches.
- ▲ Give the tree a clean, straight cut across the bottom. Most tree farms will do this for you, as well as drill a hole in the bottom if you have the kind of tree stand that needs one.
- ▲ It can't be said enough: water, water, water. Get the tree in water as soon as you come home, and continue to water it daily.
- ▲ Keep the tree cool and away from any heat source that will dry it out.
- ▲ Use LED lights. They don't get as hot, though they won't give the traditional light you may desire.
- ▲ When the holidays are over, recycle your Christmas tree in the garden, woods or an area pond. Many towns offer a service to turn Christmas trees into mulch to be used around town.

©Timmarly/Adobe Stock

Unmatched EXCE

Story by PATRICK SMITH

After a career in telecommunications spanning more than five decades, it's undoubtedly hard to walk away. It will also be hard to match the legacy of outgoing VTX1 CEO Dave Osborn.

When he was at Southwestern Bell in 1970, party lines still served some rural areas. Since then, there have been massive technological advancements, including changes in long distance, copper service lines, fiber optics and wireless. The evolution of the industry mirrors Osborn's career. With a willingness to change, he and his family moved nine times before starting at a subsidiary of VTX1 in 2004. Those transfers included leadership positions in sales, marketing and customer service during stints in Dallas (three times), St. Louis, Fort Worth, Kansas City, Houston (twice) and New Jersey. "In my telephone management career, each new leadership position offered an opportunity to grow professionally and gain an in-depth understanding to set and achieve business goals and objectives," Osborn says.

For those who know him well, there's no mistaking an email from Dave Osborn. He signs each message with "SD," a nod to the '80s television character "Super Dave," a nickname by which most know him today. Super is also how one could describe the growth VTX1 has experienced under Osborn's leadership. With more than 20,000 customers across South Texas, the company serves an area of more than 45,000 square miles. "The desire to serve and make things better is

Dave Osborn leaves a last

an inherent trait of Dave's," says Marilyn Osborn, his wife of more than 50 years. "If there's a challenge, Dave's going to look for ways to solve it."

And not every challenge he faced focused on technology. "I know one thing that bothered him when he first got here is that employees from Valley Telephone subsidiaries didn't have health insurance like those at the parent company," Marilyn Osborn says. "He made sure they did as soon as he became CEO."

And as someone who benefited from tuition reimbursement when he got his Master of Business Administration degree while at Southwestern Bell, Osborn wanted to do the same for his employees. "He'd come home and say, 'There's all the talent in the world here, but these employees haven't gotten all the training they need. We're going to spend the money to get people trained,'" Marilyn Osborn says.

Through acclaimed holiday parties, hunting and fishing trips, conferences and more, Dave and Marilyn Osborn made lifelong friends in South Texas. While they plan to travel, with children and grandchildren nearby, there are no plans to move away in retirement. "It's been such a pleasure to get to know the employees and directors," says Marilyn Osborn. "They come from all over the service area, and Dave respects what they do and values their perspective on how to best serve the people of these communities. He's proud that VTX1 is on the cutting edge with the

same services available here as what you can find in urban areas. It's a great legacy to leave behind." 



Dave Osborn and Chief Technology Officer, Sebastian Ivanisky, taken a few months after starting at VTX1.



The board members of VTX1 gather with CEO Dave Osborn. From left: J.T. Mayo Jr., Dr. Adalberto Garza, Matthew Kiefer, Dolly Villarreal, George Bennack, Dave Osborn, Frank Weaver, James Mann and Chris Meyer.

WISDOM

ing legacy at VTX1



VTX1 employees and retired CEO Dave Osborn proudly donated to the Ronald McDonald House Charities in 2016 as part of the company's annual fundraiser.



FROM THOSE WHO KNOW DAVE OSBORN BEST

"Dave and his wife are the epitome of graciousness and elegance," says VTX1 Board President Dolly Villarreal. "It's going to be hard to replace both of them. Dave grew our company into the size it is today. He had a vision that he wanted to grow, and grow we did. Right now, we're the second-largest telco in Texas because of Dave. Because of his vision, we not only have fiber but also wireless internet. His knowledge, compassion, empathy and business sense served us well. He's an awesome man. There's never going to be another 'Super Dave.'"

"Dave's an excellent leader," VTX1 Chief Human Resources Officer Roy Sheneman says. "He's one of the most intelligent men I've ever met. He has a drive to never stop learning, and he loves technology. Dave was ahead of his time in seeing the need to reach our members through fast internet service. When Dave started, we had 85 employees and only a few locations. Now we have 12 locations, 230 employees and we're still growing. He's the best leader I have worked for in my career."

"As the newly appointed CEO of VTX1, I have relied on Dave's experience and wisdom as I seek to learn the nuances of our company and its multifaceted ventures," says current CEO Patrick McDonnell. "Dave made the transition seamless and has provided a stable environment from which to build our future as a company. It is an honor for me to follow him as CEO and seek to build upon such a strong foundation."

"Dave laid a solid foundation for the future," says Sebastian Ivanisky, chief technology officer. "We're going to miss the person, but you can't miss his legacy. His impact will be felt forever. He's the same person today that I met in 2005. His strong character has always been the same. Several years ago, a 400-foot-tall tower collapsed in our service area. With members depending on that service, he didn't have a problem getting his hands dirty with the rest of us. He made sure we always had everything needed to get the job done right."

Your connected gift guide

6 gift ideas that make the most of your high-speed internet

The holiday shopping season is here, and there has never been a better time to find the perfect gadget that takes advantage of your high-speed internet connection. From tools that make working from home look good to devices to unwind with, high-speed service will help these gifts shine for the techie in your life.

1. Google Nest Hub, \$50

Give the gift of better mornings with the Google

Nest Hub. Designed for the bedside, it can track sleep quality, update you on the weather and your calendar, stream music and video and control any smart home appliances you might have. It even has a built-in light sensor to make sure the screen is never too bright. Let's see an alarm clock do that.



2. Sonos Roam, \$180

The Roam is the perfect portable speaker for anyone on the move. Stream music, podcasts and more with great audio quality and take them from one room to the next with ease. Roam's Wi-Fi support automatically joins any other Sonos speakers around the house and also works as a smart speaker, connecting to Amazon's Alexa or Google Assistant.



3. Kindle Paperwhite, \$140

For the bookworm in the family, the Kindle Paperwhite is still the best e-reader around. The glare-free display is just like reading on real paper, while the 2021 model adds a warm light option to make reading at night easier on the eyes. Purchase new books or download old favorites in seconds without ever leaving your



favorite reading chair.

4. Logitech C920S Webcam, \$74

More people are working from home than ever before, so help the remote workers in your life look good while being productive. This Logitech webcam will offer a big upgrade over any built-in camera. It's also ideal for the livestreamers, offering great video quality at an affordable price.



5. Xbox Game Pass, \$9.99/month

If you're giving or receiving an Xbox Series X, Game Pass is a no-brainer. Essentially Netflix for games, the service offers hundreds of games on demand, from the biggest Xbox exclusives available on launch day to creative indies from your favorite developers. Download games in minutes with a fiber connection and discover something new.



6. Apple AirTag, \$30

Know someone who's always losing their keys? These tiny Bluetooth trackers are here to help. Attach them to your keys or anything else you're prone to misplacing, and the AirTag will leverage the network of nearby Apple devices to locate it — in some cases, within inches. For the Android user, the Tile Mate is just as handy. ☑



Tasty app-etizers

6 digital tools to level up your kitchen skills

Even the most experienced home cooks can use a little inspiration now and then. Fortunately, it's never been easier to find. The wide variety of cooking apps and websites available today make it easy to plan meals and even eat healthier. Whether you're looking to ditch the stacks of faded recipes, make something new or find video instructions to walk you through every step, these tools will bring a little extra flavor to your kitchen.



SideChef — If you're just starting out in the kitchen, SideChef is great for learning the basics. A cooking novice created the app for beginners, and it does away with fancy culinary terminology and instead offers dynamic guidance through recipes, providing step-by-step photos, hands-free voice commands and built-in timers. There are over 18,000 interactive smart recipes to try out, so pick your favorite and get cooking.



Food Network Kitchen — Craving something you just saw on the Food Network? The Food Network Kitchen features recipes from fan-favorite personalities and food writers, along with prep time, cook time and difficulty level. Any fan of the network will feel right at home in the app, which lets you search more than 80,000 recipes for categories like grilling, baking, kid-friendly and dairy-free.



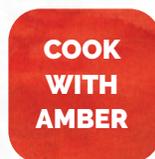
Cookpad — For those looking for a more social cooking experience, Cookpad offers a community of home chefs around the world. Discover new ideas, share photos, ask questions and exchange advice. You can even take part in cooking challenges or online cooking classes. And since Cookpad's user base is global, there are plenty of international recipes to satisfy an adventurous palate.



Forks — From vegan lifestyle site Forks Over Knives, the Forks app offers over 600 recipes for anyone sticking to a plant-based diet. What the app lacks in quantity it makes up for in quality, convenience and ease of use. There are new recipes each week, and you can export your favorites to have a ready-made shopping list for your next grocery trip.



Mealime — Meal planning can be a headache, but Mealime makes it easy. The app curates recipe suggestions based on your preferences to help you find healthy new favorites. They're all guaranteed to take 30 minutes or less to cook, but you can also import recipes from the web to add more options.



Cook with Amber — Teenage cook Amber Kelley has been encouraging kids to get in the kitchen since 2012. Today, college keeps her pretty busy. But her YouTube channel, Cook with Amber, still features years' worth of videos that walk kids through their own healthy and delicious kitchen adventures so you can make dinner and memories together. 🗨️





A Serva

VTX1 employees embrace their communities

Story by KATIE NORRIS

VTX1 understands that community service transcends the work of each person. Through cooperation, concern for others and the will of individuals to go out of their way, communities can transform.

VTX1's commitment to community service is ingrained in how we do business. Whether we're giving back to students through

scholarships, sending youth to our nation's capital or sponsoring community organizations and events, we are proud to be an active partner of the communities we serve.

Our employees share that perspective and invest themselves in their communities, using their passions and talents to serve others.

BROADBAND ADVOCATE



Jeff Patterson, director of sales, has worked with VTX1 for over three years, and his passion for broadband access extends into the community.

Jeff attends meetings of the RGV Partnership, a nonprofit that facilitates collaboration for economic development, education and infrastructure in the Rio Grande Valley. He adds a valuable perspective as a VTX1 employee and concerned citizen. Jeff also attends events for several chambers of commerce. "The hours I give each week attending

these events further my goals to help the community get broadband access," he says.

As someone who grew up in a low-income home, Jeff says he understands "how hard getting ahead is without the proper resources." His desire is for every child to have the tools to succeed. "Every person deserves an equal opportunity," he says.

CIVIC LEADER



Chris Tamez, the executive administrative assistant to the CEO, has been a dedicated VTX1 employee for five years. As a part of her role, she interacts

with a variety of people from the service area. "I'm a people person, and I like to help any way that I can," she says.

Chris, who grew up in Raymondville, is a local business owner, Raymondville City Commissioner, Economic Development Council board member, planning and zoning board member and treasurer of the Raymondville Athletic Booster Club. "I wanted to do more for my community, and then, everything just fell into place," she says.

She originally ran for city commissioner in 2015 because she wanted to see more economic growth. Since then, her community involvement has grown, and she especially enjoys her work with the Raymondville Athletic Booster Club. Like VTX1, the Raymondville Athletic Booster Club is "raising money for students to get scholarships to further their education," she says.

Chris loves watching the students' faces light up when they receive their scholarships. "It's just touching," she says.



nt's Heart

COMMUNITY SUPPORTER



Billing Manager **Dora Vargas** enjoys community service because of “the camaraderie and outlet it gives from everyday craziness,” she says.

Dora, a 17-year VTX1 employee, also volunteers with the Raymondville Athletic Booster Club. Recently elected secretary by her peers, she records meeting minutes and prepares agendas so the group can continue supporting local youth athletes.

Dora also participates in the Port Mansfield Beach & Cut Cleanup, an annual community service event. She says volunteering at the cleanup “gives me pleasure to give back not only to the community, but also to nature.” Her family is passionate about recreational fishing, and “the water gives us healthy fish to eat,” she says.

Dora is an active member of her church, Our Lady of Guadalupe. She grew up volunteering for her parish and now teaches children’s religious education classes. “Participating in my parish is a great blessing and an ongoing pleasure,” she says.

LOCAL HERO



When **Mario Vicencio** isn’t maintaining systems, installing internet and troubleshooting as an outside plant combination technician, he serves as a volunteer firefighter at the Linn-San Manuel Volunteer Fire Department. For over 14 years, Mario has been fighting fires, providing first aid, extricating people from crashed vehicles and completing search and rescue missions.

Mario started attending fire department meetings with his parents as a teenager. “When I came of age, I began to volunteer and eventually became lieutenant and, finally, captain,” he says.

As a firefighter, Mario also takes part in an annual Christmas Eve run, dressing as Santa Claus and distributing gifts and candy to local children. “Oftentimes these are the only gifts some of these children receive, and to see the joy on their faces is priceless,” he says. “I am blessed to continue to have the strength to serve my community and VTX1.”

INSPIRING MENTOR



As VTX1’s purchasing agent since 2018, **John Butler** sees his work with VTX1 and his community as connected. John has been a member of the Willacy County Young Farmers for about 20 years. The organization supports youth through college scholarships, outdoor activities and stock show sponsorships. “I love that we have the ability to impact so many young lives,” he says.

John got involved in agriculture as a high school student and joined the group as a member after graduation. After around 10 years of service to the chapter, he became president and has spent a decade in that role. John also volunteers as a leader for his son’s Boy Scout troop when the group goes camping. He hopes to support his son to become an Eagle Scout one day. “You never know what impact you may have on someone’s life, but most importantly, you will never know the impact serving will have on your life until you do it,” John says. 🗨️

Learn more about VTX1's commitment to community on our website at vtx1.net/community.

VTX1 employees gather to donate to the Willacy County Young Farmers.

A tasty tradition

Celebrate the season with sweet holiday treats

Baking is a time-honored tradition in so many households this time of year. Kids love sprinkles, and holiday hosts appreciate having sweets on hand for unexpected guests and tasty gifts for neighbors and friends.

There are a few important tips that can make your holiday baking a stress-free experience and perhaps a little more rewarding for those who will be enjoying the results of your efforts. Many of us have had baking disasters that weren't funny at the time but made for entertaining stories later. That doesn't need to be the case, though, if you:

▶ **Organize** — Make lists of all the things

you want to bake and the ingredients you'll need. Do this a couple of days ahead of time so you can decide what will need to be frozen and used in coming weeks, such as cookie dough.

▶ **Check your pantry for the essentials** — Make sure you have plenty of sugar, flour, butter, eggs and the all-important extracts of the holiday season: vanilla, almond and, oh, yes, peppermint. There's nothing more aggravating than getting halfway through a recipe only to open the sugar bag and discover it's nearly empty. Don't forget cooking spray and parchment paper, too. You'll be needing them.

▶ **Make sure you have plenty of room in your refrigerator** — Some baked goods need to be chilled. This is a good time to throw out what's been in the fridge a little too long or to use up any leftovers.

▶ **Ponder presentation** — Check your closets and cabinets for decorative cookie tins. You'll need them for more than just cookies, they're also great for caramel corn, fudge, brownies and bars. A colorful holiday tin is so much more festive than a zip-top bag with a stick-on bow.

Now, get baking. It's almost Christmas!



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HOLIDAY CARAMEL CORN

One word of caution: be sure to weed out all of the unpopped kernels so there are no unexpectedly hard bites in this delicious, sweet-salty snack.

- 3 quarts popped popcorn (about 2 bags microwave popcorn, popped)
- 1/2 cup (1 stick) butter (no substitute)
- 1 cup brown sugar, firmly packed
- 1/4 cup dark corn syrup
- 1/2 teaspoon salt
- 1/4 teaspoon baking soda
- 1 teaspoon vanilla
- 2 cups mixed nuts

Heat oven to 250 F.

Place popped popcorn into a large, 4-inch-deep buttered baking pan, and place it in the oven to keep warm. In a large saucepan, melt the butter over

low heat. Stir in brown sugar, corn syrup and salt. Bring to a soft boil, stirring constantly. Boil without stirring for 5 minutes. Remove from heat, and quickly stir in the baking soda and vanilla.

Remove popcorn from the oven. Slowly pour syrup mixture over popcorn, and add nuts, mixing well. This may prove a bit difficult at first, as the caramel mixture hardens quickly once removed from the heat. But as you stir it while it's baking in the oven, it will soften and get much easier to stir.

Butter a large cookie sheet, and turn the popcorn mixture into the pan. Bake for 45 minutes to 1 hour, stirring every 15 minutes. You don't want the popcorn to get overly browned. Remove from the oven and cool completely. Break apart. Store in tightly covered tins.



CRANBERRY ORANGE HOLIDAY NUT BREAD

- 2 cups flour
- 1 cup sugar
- 2 teaspoons baking powder
- 3/4 teaspoon salt
- 1/2 teaspoon baking soda
- 1/4 cup butter, softened
- 1 tablespoon grated orange peel
- 3/4 cup orange juice
- 1 teaspoon vanilla
- 2 large eggs
- 1 cup fresh or frozen cranberries
- 6 ounces chopped pecans

Preheat the oven to 350 F. Grease the bottom of a 9-by-5-inch loaf pan and set aside.

In a large bowl, mix the flour, sugar, baking powder, salt and baking soda. Stir in the butter until the mixture is crumbly. Stir

in the orange peel, orange juice, vanilla and eggs, just until the batter comes together. Be careful not to overmix. Fold in the fresh cranberries and nuts.

Transfer the batter to the prepared baking pan. Bake until a wooden toothpick inserted in the middle comes out clean: about 50 minutes to 1 hour. Cool in the pan for 5 minutes before loosening the sides of the loaf from the pan. Transfer the loaf to a rack to cool completely before slicing. Let cool completely and wrap with plastic wrap.



PEANUT BUTTER STARS

A classic holiday cookie. These freeze well, so make plenty to enjoy throughout the season.

- 1/2 cup shortening
- 1/2 cup peanut butter
- 3/4 cup granulated sugar
- 1/2 cup packed brown sugar

- 1 teaspoon baking powder
- 1/8 teaspoon baking soda
- 1 egg
- 2 tablespoons milk
- 1 teaspoon vanilla
- 1 3/4 cups all-purpose flour
- 1/4 cup granulated sugar
- Chocolate kisses or stars

Preheat the oven to 350 F.

In a large mixing bowl, beat shortening and peanut butter with an electric mixer on medium-high speed for 30 seconds. Add 1/2 cup of the granulated sugar, along with the brown sugar, baking powder and baking soda. Beat until combined, scraping sides of bowl occasionally. Beat in egg, milk and vanilla until combined. Beat in as much of the flour as you can with the mixer. Stir in any remaining flour.

Shape dough into 1-inch balls. Roll balls in 1/4 cup granulated sugar. Place 2 inches apart on an ungreased cookie sheet. Bake for 10-12 minutes or until edges are firm and bottoms are lightly browned. Immediately press a chocolate star or kiss into the center of each cookie. Transfer to a wire rack and let cool. Store in airtight containers. Makes 54 cookies. 📄



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