

The User Manual Is a Loser Manual

Private Cable Operators should follow the example of good retailers – and some FTTH providers

By Bryan J. Rader ■ *Bandwidth Consulting LLC*

Over the years, I have followed many of our service technicians into customers' homes to complete an install, or to handle a trouble call. The level of subscriber questions is quite telling. "So how do I make my DVD players work in conjunction with my new digital box?" "How do I install a wireless router?" "What button must I press to make my DVR work?"

OK, so some of those questions come from my household. But they are coming from many others, too. It is quite apparent that there is an overwhelming sense of concern and frustration from today's cable TV subscriber about all of the new "bells and whistles" being thrown at them by technology providers.

Sure, the college student future IT expert can keep up. But what about the retiree in Palm Beach? Or the single parent with small kids who doesn't have time to figure it out? Or the first-time triple play subscriber?

Many services providers bake up some really poor solutions to this issue of technology confusion. "Provide'm with a user manual," some of them say. "They can reference it when they have a problem."

Or, even better: "Put the manual on the Internet so they can click through to find the answer." (Hmmm, what if they can't get on line?) Or my favorite, "why don't we streamline it, and just give the customer a list of frequently asked questions? We know everything they're going to ask about anyway."

Oh yeah? Do you know that the completely frustrated, confused subscriber may ask for a new cable provider soon?

I love the trend that is developing on the periphery of our business right now to address these "technology fears" of so many consumers today. And it's coming out of the electronic retailer industry.

Retailers Lead

Recently, Circuit City made its Firedog services available at more than 600 superstores across the U.S. This in-home technical support service was designed by Circuit City to better serve its increasingly confused customer base. Specifically, Circuit City advertises "Firedog can solve any and all of your technology problems and help you realize the full potential of your digital life." In other words, Firedog will send humans to your home (by appointment), set up your new products, show you how to use them, and answer any questions.

Now that's real customer education. Wireless networks? HD sets? DVR receivers? New computers? Yes, they can help you with all of the above. How do I know? A Firedog technician spent several hours at my home recently educating us, and resolving "our" confusion.

And Firedog techs are personable and smart. They even show up in branded cars, wearing bright Firedog uniforms. Circuit City just put over 700 of its techs through advanced Microsoft training. Although it just fired 3500 of its best salespeople, at least it is improving service to the customers it gets. This is light years removed from the "just-drop-off-a-user-guide" mentality. Others are following Circuit City's lead. Best Buy offers Geek Squad, for example.

Even the largest operator in our space - Comcast - has begun to try new ideas to further educate its consumer in this ever-confusing industry. Comcast recently opened a new retail store in Boston called Connect, where customers can buy gadgets and schedule installations of new services. Customers can relax in the store and work with consultants who help outfit their digital home with both hardware and content.

A senior executive for the new store recently said, "this is a store that demystifies technology and services. We're about education first."

What great advice. If you think about it, all private cable operators actually have a retail store in each of their cable systems. It's called the "leasing office." This is a great place to begin the consumer education process. And with our scheduled service visits, we can replicate our own Firedog or Geek Squad in-home solutions.

Several providers in our space already do this. Zoomy Communications uses a model home in its communities to demonstrate its products and services. And Connexion Technologies, another industry player, trains its technicians to handle a myriad of consumer new service connection issues.

It's a great opportunity for all of us to stop using the "user manual" approach, and begin to focus on fixing consumer confusion with smart, "solutions-oriented" service techs.

A tech from one of our competitors once said to me, "I can hook up five customers in an hour. I just connect'm at the box, and move onto the next one." Oh yeah? You might be back in a week to disconnect several of them at the box too, unless you reconsider your approach to service and customer education. **BBP**

About the Author

Bryan J. Rader, former CEO of MediaWorks before selling the company last year, has recently founded a new firm, Bandwidth Consulting LLC, where he is advising operators and providers in the MDU market segment. He also remains President of IMCC. Bryan can be contacted at bryanjnrader@yahoo.com or by phone at 636-536-0011.