

Think Nationally, Act Locally

A successful MDU broadband business needs to offer good customer service and establish a local presence to understand the unique needs of each community it serves.

By Bryan J. Rader / *UpStream Network*

It seems as though a person could run a nationwide MDU internet business from a single corporate office, right? Throw a bunch of smart people at headquarters, and build all operational functions in a centralized spot. Ya know, activate, authenticate and upgrade with a few keystrokes from unknown staff in a faraway place.

It's been tried before. You've seen these plans: Never talk to the customer. Never visit the property manager. Never perform network quality-control checks on-site. Why be there at all? (Wait ... isn't that Big Cable's business model?)

For some industries, this approach can work very well. Click the Amazon button; the order is fulfilled. Jump on an idle scooter on the sidewalk; ride across town. No need for any customer interaction at all. It works.

But other businesses have touch points that go way beyond swiping or clicking, and the no-customer-service, hide-behind-the-corporate-office plan won't work for long.

CUSTOMER SERVICE FOCUS

When I first got into the broadband industry, dozens of local and regional service providers were talking about merging, or "rolling up." The premise became that scale could help with customer service. Except it couldn't.

A company based in the Northwest can't effectively manage a relationship in Denver, Minneapolis or Miami. How can it? If corporate executives never visit the property, how can they know what's really going on?

The apartment industry figured this out a long time ago. Today, several very large property owners run operations in multiple states and time zones. They realized that the only way they could operate their businesses effectively was to develop a human infrastructure that truly managed each individual community. Corporate provided the tools, but the local property, including its regional manager, drove many of the decisions about revenue, amenities and customer satisfaction.

These large property owners realized that every one of their communities had a unique situation in the market. Resident profiles were different, market choices varied and needs were specific to each community. So they built a structure that allowed for local decision-making.

The broadband business is clearly the same.

A LOCAL TOUCH

Ever since the cable industry began in the 1970s, it has been a "local" business. When I run into old pay-TV pioneers at industry events, they tell great stories about the mayors of their franchises' towns, how they sponsored high school games or fundraisers with city council members.

They knew the terrain. They knew who would complain about a rate increase, whom to visit when there was an outage, which council member to meet with when programming lineups shifted. Want to know how you're doing? Go to the local coffee shop every morning – you'll find out!

Want to know how we're doing? Go to the property manager's office every morning. You'll know right away. Why? Because it's a local business.

Our products have changed, but the needs have not. And none of this will change the need for "local touch."

I love when we review a trouble ticket report in a staff meeting, and an associate says, "I can tell you what was happening in unit 203-C. Mrs. Johnson bought a new computer and needed help getting on the network. It was a customer education call."

See? That's local! Yes, a nationwide, remote call center might have helped Mrs. Johnson, but it was a much better "experience" to do it in person. And the local tech also was able to explain the situation to the property manager, further strengthening the relationship.

I hear one day we may be able to do internet-based surgeries from remote locations. It sounds nice, efficient, robotic, less expensive. But where is the bedside manner with patients? They want to see their surgeons in front of them. So do our internet customers.

I am very excited about the latest steps toward another round of roll ups in our market. I really believe our MDU customers can benefit from this scale. But we must remember to stay local. This combination can provide even better outcomes. ❖

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