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The Customer Is Right

The economist Adam Smith said, "Consumption is the sole end and purpose of all production; and the interest of the producer ought to be attended to, only so far as it may be necessary for promoting that of the consumer." He might well have been talking about broadband.

Recently, a **BROADBAND COMMUNITIES** reader tweeted a thank-you to the magazine for its work and noted, "It's starting to feel like things are tipping in the right direction!" Though we like appreciation as much as the next magazine does, the best part of the tweet was the comment about "tipping in the right direction." The right direction, in my view, is toward seeing broadband in terms of its value to customers, not just to providers. (In this case, of course, some customers are themselves producers.)

Even if most consumers don't know or care what a gigabit is (see p. 60), they want seamless, hassle-free Internet service. They want to keep buying new devices, signing up for new over-the-top services and watching video in the latest and greatest formats. Business users want to access cloud services and to connect seamlessly with their customers and suppliers. Neither consumers nor businesses want to worry about whether their Internet connections are up to the job.

None of that is new. What's new is the response to that demand. The days of providers' bashing bandwidth hogs and telling customers "We know best" are ending. Whether because of increased access to capital, declining transport costs, fear of competition or the realization that bandwidth demand won't stop growing, most providers are now starting to build future-

proof networks. All the experts we interviewed about predictions for the coming year (see p. 44) forecast a surge in fiber-to-the-home and other ultra-broadband deployments in 2015 and possibly a bigger surge in 2016.

Of course, providers can't invest everywhere at once – so it's still important for communities to retain control of their broadband destinies.

The FCC and the White House are jumping on the bandwagon with customer-oriented policy proposals (see p. 32) whose aim is to make broadband universally accessible and affordable. There's opposition to these proposals, along with some legitimate concern about their implementation, but increasingly it feels like a rearguard action.

Another magazine reader called recently to ask whether, as an investor in FTTH, he would be on the right side of history. I said he would be. Barring the collapse of civilization, it's hard to imagine customers' demanding less connectivity. It's equally hard to imagine that they won't get what they need in one way or another. Better to be the company providing what customers need than the one trying to hold back the tide. ♦

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