

# Time to Change the Name

“Private cable operator” is a relic from the past. Let’s find a new, more accurate term to describe this innovative industry.

By Bryan Rader / *Bandwidth Consulting LLC*

I am often dumbfounded when a company that has a public relations nightmare or a tired, old brand changes its name to gloss over the problem. Why change a brand without changing the product?

In the cable and broadband industry, many companies are changing their brands and actually doing a good job of changing the products. The industry has had its share of public relations disasters and tired, old brands, but today’s new names reflect the future of the business. Charter Communications is now Spectrum. Comcast is now XFINITY. And Time Warner Cable is now Maxx (in some areas), except that it almost became Comcast and now is likely to become Charter, which is now Spectrum.

AT&T has had a lot of experience changing brands over the years (SBC, BellSouth, Cingular). It recently bought DIRECTV and quickly added the tagline “now part of the AT&T family.” Then it merged the operation with U-verse and selected AT&T Entertainment Services as the new, combined brand for satellite and landline operations.

Name changes can be helpful for companies that want to separate themselves from their pasts or that have drifted into new business areas their names no longer fit. For instance, Philip Morris became Altria in 2003, and Sound of Music became Best Buy in 1983. These new brands helped the companies connect to their new product categories.

Why does this matter to someone in the multifamily technology business? Great question! For the last 30 years, the leading alternatives to large cable and telco providers have been the independents, often referred to as PCOs. A PCO is a private cable operator created to provide cable TV services from a single C-Band dish to a private apartment community, hotel, or similar property.

PCOs grew as alternatives to franchised cable companies, otherwise known as MSOs. The “cable wars,” though not on a par with the cola wars or the burger wars, were fought throughout the 1980s, 1990s and early 2000s across hundreds of apartment communities. MSO battled PCO for the exclusive right to serve a community.

Many PCOs grew quite large during this time. At one point, more than a dozen PCOs had 50,000 or more customers, and two had more than 200,000 customers. The business was humming, and private cable operators were all the buzz. However, after an upgrade to digital video (with the



help of DIRECTV and DISH) and the rapid expansion into broadband, the business started to change. The term “private cable” no longer fit the category, even though the name “PCO” stuck the way “Kleenex” did to the tissue industry.

Most independents joining the multiple-dwelling-unit (MDU) technology space are focused on delivering the best broadband experience to their customers, whether they use fiber, wireless, Ethernet or cable modem. These new guys have never heard the term “PCO” before and certainly don’t fit the past definition of private cable.

Why worry about it now? Well, names matter, and it’s appropriate that the new guys, and many of the current ones, are categorized properly when presented to MDU owners or developers as potential providers for new projects. The term “PCO” has gone stale and outlived its usefulness. It doesn’t reflect the changes the industry made in the past decade. These companies were the first to offer gigabit speeds, managed wireless networks and streaming video for MDUs. That doesn’t sound like “private cable.”

So, why should they be saddled with a brand from the past? They shouldn’t.

What then, should independent operators be called? I haven’t quite figured that out, but I like the name “broadband service providers,” as it connotes the importance of networks, with an emphasis on service. It’s gotta be better than PCO, right? ♦

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