

Q&A with Chrystie Walker Brown, CEO, Walker and Associates

## Putting the ‘Value-Add’ Into Value-Added Distribution

The CEO of a leading distributor reflects on the challenges network deployers face – and how distributors can help them meet those challenges.

**S**mall and mid-sized network deployers often rely heavily on distributors to advise them about purchasing decisions and help them plan, organize and even finance their deployments. In the FTTH arena, one leading distributor is Walker and Associates, based in Welcome, North Carolina. The company has played a key role in fiber deployments across the United States.

As Walker prepares to celebrate its 50th anniversary in 2020, **BROADBAND COMMUNITIES** took the opportunity to ask Chrystie Walker Brown, the company’s CEO and board chairwoman, about her perspective on the industry. The daughter of founders Virginia and Chris Walker, Brown has witnessed the growth and development of the company since the 1970s. She has served on the board of Walker and Associates since 2001 and worked in several parts of the business before becoming CEO in 2014 and chairwoman in 2017.

**BROADBAND COMMUNITIES:** *Walker has had a close-up view of the communications industry for half a century. Apart from the enormous changes in technology over that period – digitization, the replacement of copper with fiber and so forth – what has changed most in the way the industry operates?*

**CHRISTIE WALKER BROWN:** Change is a constant in this industry, and the rate of change is quickening. Product



Chrystie Walker Brown  
CEO, Walker and Associates

life cycles have shortened, and business model disruption throughout the value chain occurs much more often. Networks need to be agile, so product capabilities and service capabilities need to be agile as well. This means fast adjustments to broadband services offers, fast attainment of competitive network speeds and latencies,

fast correction of network points of risk, fast service turn-up. Operators need to be very forward looking to future proof their networks. Fiber is one important step. Advanced switching and routing is another. Network automation is ever increasing. Carriers typically need help with each of these steps.

As a value-added distributor, Walker and Associates believes that a holistic approach is the best response to these needs. Establishing service delivery goals, best-of vendor product selection and sound deployment plans are key. Truly partnering with carriers to help them meet and monetize their customers' demands with agile, reliable network solutions is imperative.

**BBC:** *What new developments are your customers most concerned about, and what developments do you think they should prepare themselves for?*

**CWB:** The same generation that saw the end of the landline now drives the TV cable-cutting wave disrupting the video value proposition most of our customers built with triple-play services. Walker offers experience and guidance to rural service providers about how to evolve their video or triple-play services. Newer business models are emerging, allowing telcos to continue to offer streaming services without the cost of their originating headends. Consumer demand for increased broadband speeds is now driven largely by homes with 20 or more connected devices. What was a premium 1 gig service increased to 10 gigs and is now on its way to becoming 100 gigs. We can expect to see sophisticated, automated network management systems that provision and coordinate services and enhance security from core to edge. These systems will make it possible for networks to handle needed increases in capacity.

Operators are looking at offering not only high speed but also high value. This includes apps that support subscription-based content/video on demand, VoIP, personalized security, Wi-Fi and management of

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network experiences for residential and business customers.

Walker's customers operate very capital-intensive networks. Adapting their businesses to take advantage of incremental network monetization opportunities is key to their survival. 5G wireless, the internet of things, artificial intelligence and edge computing present both opportunities and complications for providers. They need to make wise technology investments to provide customers with seamlessly orchestrated services.

We understand that our customers are investing their time, their effort and their capital in building reliable, world-class networks that will scale to meet end-user demand. We present an extensive vendor menu based on our long-term strategic relationships. Walker offers an expanded portfolio of professional and value-added services to support customers through every step of the process by providing unbiased, consultative solutions and services. We partner with customers to face today's challenges and those around the corner.

**BBC:** *How can distributors help communications service providers build better networks and build them more efficiently?*

**CWB:** Distribution in and of itself is highly valuable, but going back to my comment about a holistic approach, our customers frankly need much more to monetize their offerings and serve their customers well. Value-added distribution is vital. Specialized sourcing and warehousing, logistics and field installation services are all critical

and can help our customers save time and money. Walker's ability to proactively assist customers on the road ahead and provide pre-deployment through post-deployment support eliminates headaches and provides tremendous value. We now offer advanced network design and deployment of network management applications. Our customers deploy larger and more sophisticated networks each day. For them to offer seamless service, we must provide seamless support. That is the "value-add" of value-added distribution. This is the new distribution.

**BBC:** *Let's focus on a topic that's grabbing headlines today. Do you have customers trying to replace Huawei equipment in their broadband networks? Do you have advice for them about doing this in the safest, least disruptive and most cost-efficient way?*

**CWB:** They should talk with our engineering staff about network migration. From what I understand, Huawei has about a 1 percent market share in the broadband access equipment space in North America; and fortunately, the percentage is even lower in the United States. Frankly, service providers don't need the risk and exposure of using those products. Our market offers plenty of alternative products and capabilities. This includes core, aggregation and edge technologies that we upgrade every day to meet next-generation performance requirements. Walker and Associates has long-term strategic relationships throughout the ecosystem and can help service providers select and deploy better, safer critical infrastructure solutions. ❖