

US Underdogs Have to Adapt

To accommodate emerging customer expectations, independent broadband providers need to adapt how they do business.

By Bryan J. Rader / *Single Digits*

I recently went to see a movie with my son. It was the first time I'd been inside a movie theater since 2019. We saw "American Underdog," the unlikely story of Kurt Warner's rise from grocery store stock boy to MVP quarterback in Super Bowl 34.

"American Underdog" could easily be the headline for where the movie theater business is today. Thousands of screens closed during the pandemic, and many may not reopen. Major studios bypassed theaters altogether and distributed movies directly to streaming services. People were afraid to enter a theater and sit in tight quarters, and frankly, enjoying a great film from the couch in their living rooms was convenient.

But as I sat in the theater before the previews began, I realized how much the theater business has changed to remain relevant. First, we reserved our seats before we even left home. We didn't need to strategize about where to sit or ask a 16-year-old usher with a flashlight for assistance in finding two seats together.

Second, our seats were no longer seats. They were lounge chairs, cushier than a first-class recliner on a luxury European transatlantic flight. There was also no waiting in the concession stand line behind a family that couldn't decide between Milk Duds and peanut M&Ms. A bartender took our food order right when we walked in. Our snacks were delivered to our seats, and I had to sit back up to place them on the table in front of me.

The experience was very uplifting. We enjoyed watching Kurt Warner's story with 50 other theatergoers, including some, like my son, wearing a Warner football jersey. The people around us laughed together, cried simultaneously, and clapped in unison when the "underdog" won the Super Bowl. Social connectivity had been a distant memory during the past two years.

EVOLVE OR DIE

Movie theaters are an American tradition. They've been a part of people's lives since the nickelodeons of the 1920s – great for date night, family outings or a two-hour escape from reality.

But movie theater owners understand they must adapt to remain relevant and attractive to their potential audience. They don't want to be the next Radio Shack or Blockbuster Video. They must evolve or die.

The movie theater industry will be smaller going forward, but it is developing a winning formula that will work well when the pandemic finally comes to an end.

AN ADAPTING INDUSTRY

Independent broadband providers must also be prepared to adjust the ways they do business. They already have adapted a lot in recent years: Companies are abandoning coax for fiber. They are managing Wi-Fi instead of using bring-your-own-device solutions. And bulk internet is quickly replacing retail choice.

There are other ways the industry can tailor ways it provides customer care. Most residents don't have time to sit on hold waiting for a call-center rep. Most want instant support, possibly using Zoom on their smartphones to help address questions.

What about the way broadband providers engage property managers and ownership groups? Providers have so much data to offer them about their residents' usage and the networks in their communities.

How about product expansion? Smart-home apps, technology amenities, and common-area solutions can all be part of the broadband industry's adaptation plans.

Adapting is the key to success in all industries, including broadband. Watching the movie theater industry adapt today is an excellent example of its importance. I'm impressed with the early steps it has taken, and believe it will succeed as the next American underdog.

In the broadband industry, let's keep up our pace of adapting too. ❖

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