Where's My Content?

The eternal multifamily struggle to stay flexible in live content delivery.

By Sebastian Pereira / *Multifamily Broadband Council* and *Broadband Enterprise*

On a flight to a Wireless Internet Service Providers Association show in Las Vegas, I was surprised when a passenger in the front seat asked the flight attendant if the in-flight content was "live," stating that he did not want to watch it if not. I was surprised because the flight was westbound, not eastbound, and I would have thought only an eastbound passenger would level this complaint. (West Coast viewers tend to be more demanding and to limit viewing to "live" content.) At that instant I knew: We had a near-national content delivery crisis on our hands!

Today subscribers can choose content based on almost unlimited bandwidth. Recent one-on-one conversations let me in on some viewing secrets. I heard things such as, "I've already scrolled the internet," or "I've seen all the movies I need to on Netflix." If you've heard similar remarks, you already know that multifamily broadband providers are in a second wave of a content delivery crisis. How do we get more "live" content, have the flexibility to switch between different satellite sources or other video feeds, and still stay relevant in delivery?

Enter residential IPTV. I first heard that term in 2007, when Microsoft launched its IPTV solution. Today, big business technology has finally reached in-building delivery within the multifamily industry.

NEW MULTIFAMILY OPTIONS

Technology available now enables independent operators installing systems in the multifamily space to stay flexible on content delivery. Residents can opt in with one provider and get premium channels from another without changing underlying infrastructure. IPTV not only enables flexibility but also lowers the subscriber equipment footprint. If a TV already has a player, a resident does not need an end user set-top box. And if a resident's TV doesn't have a player, a firestick delivering the premium content works. The H.265 standard allows content to be delivered wirelessly to the TV at half the original bandwidth. If contracts with one vendor turn sour, it can be replaced without subscriber residents knowing a change was made.

There are also some interesting communication options available with this platform. IPTV enables apartment owners to send messages to subscribers on their televisions. TV service can be shut off if a subscriber does not respond to repeated requests to, perhaps, pay the rent. In-building live chat groups and community groups can be started to facilitate resident engagement, providing a much-needed opt-in for social connection. An easy-to-use training channel or a local what-to-do channel run by a campus or community office enables live and local updates.

And did I mention the advertising possibilities? This opens an exciting way to monetize the network and create ancillary revenue while helping local businesses get exposure.

All of this has helped the advancement of a true wireless model for multifamily video – no more coax; no more Cat 5 or fiber; and access points that reach 1 Gbps. If well engineered and tested, all that's needed is 3–5 Mbps per unit. Because most live source content will be situated at an apartment or a central site, all IPTV video traffic will be local. Add catch-up TV through DVR use, local server movies-on-demand and other features such as gaming, and the model will keep subscriber time better contained locally as opposed to creating greater demand for internet services.

Some believe the next wave of service providers will host movie content because it is available far and wide, and content providers can make money selling it for 2 to 5 cents per use. During the last six months, the installation or use of 10 gig Layer 2 fiber network connections have been trending to multifamily communities and student housing based on the heavy service demand and enhanced need for fast, dependable broadband services. Most often, this is the shortest path to an internet hub, as opposed to an IP connection from a telco.

If you have experienced a fiber cut, you know that nine times out of 10 it is buried only 6 inches below the surface and 400 to 600 miles away. Today's telcos scramble to light up carrier hotels and points of presence more than ever before as they try to get closer to subscribers. One reason independent operators have had success in multifamily with IPTV is that they can place servers at a short physical distance from subscribers to create an optimal landscape for content hosting and IP video. In the past, some service providers did not want to support apps, such as Netflix, but embracing access to these technology platforms allows for greater overall resident satisfaction.

Understanding where a provider's bandwidth begins and ends and what technology upgrade options are available suddenly became key to resident stickiness. After all, where can residents find neighbor-TV-chat, an in-home onscreen happy hour, or an online children's study group during quarantine? Do service providers need more? Or, to make a play on a long-time favorite, will IPTV help keep us "stayin' live"? ❖

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