The Case for a Common Sense Broadband Investment Strategy

Is your broadband expansion strategic plan executable by engineering?

By Raj Singh / *VCTI*

Today's broadband investment market is extraordinary. An unprecedented amount of government money, more than $100 billion, is in or will be entering the market soon as people recognize the critical imperative of upgrading and expanding broadband availability to every corner of the country. When that much money floods in, the landscape of players and technologies will evolve quickly, creating real risks to service provider business plans and market share. It is a Wild West land grab in all 50 states and U.S. territories.

Given the dangers, enormous preparation and money involved, careful planning is critically important. The number of moving parts takes focus, good data and analytics – and a solid team to deliver successfully.

It is no longer enough for a company, and its investors, to have only a solid strategic plan. Today's market climate demands that strategy translate quickly to plan development. Then, the program needs to flow swiftly to the execution phase without jeopardizing the foundation of quality analytics and outputs that will make or break the entire business case.

Even the most innovative, ambitious broadband service providers find implementing strategic and tactical plans challenging. When making multimillion-dollar decisions about broadband investments, connecting the growth strategy to a network build plan and then into actual execution (design and construction) can be difficult. This is not simply a question of talent and leadership; often, it's a question of having access to a linked set of creative methodologies, reliable data, up-to-date market insights and sophisticated modeling tools to achieve goals and give leaders justified confidence in their choices.

MAKE A DEPLOYMENT CHECKLIST

To ensure that they develop a genuinely executable strategy, leaders need to ask themselves and their senior teams the following questions:

1   Do we have the tools to rapidly identify and prioritize the myriad broadband investment opportunities in front of us? Suppose we are looking at five or 50 prospective market investments. Can we get data on market demographics, competitive presence and services offered, potential subsidies, and decently accurate cost-to-build figures to subsidized locations?

How many additional homes can we touch with that new network? What is the best way to identify and partner with local, state and federal governmental entities to expand high-speed broadband services to underserved and unserved communities, schools and businesses struggling to receive broadband investments and grants?

Do we have tools and methodologies to obtain fast access to a comprehensive, integrated analysis of the market and reliable insight into the network build so that the team can stack rank and prioritize the company investments? How do we scale and

accelerate our ability to respond to grant RFPs and proactively propose solutions for underserved and unserved communities?

2   Is our data sound? Are elements that will impact the ultimate on-the-ground engineering efforts visible? Do we have accurate insight into critical environmental factors that will affect the business case? For example, reliable insight into utility pole presence, locations along the planned route, and usability translate into business-case network build costs that are trustworthy today and into the future.

In addition, understanding whether the terrain lends itself easily to wireless (fixed or mobile) services is critical to understanding threats and opportunities. For instance, a less wireless-friendly environment may offer a longer competitive advantage: It is difficult for fixed-wireless operators to enter quickly and deliver competitive services. Conversely, a terrain with greater wireless propensity offers options to upgrade services in the near term for the hardest-to-reach locations – the ones typically near the end of the thread buildout plan.

3   Do we have the tools to quickly and swiftly craft actionable network plans that incorporate community priorities into a winning bid to take full advantage of government programs, including the ability to layer government programs wherever possible?

4   Does the team have the capacity, availability and resources to execute? If not, what resources are needed to help manage the plan? In other words, can the team quickly translate strategic business priorities into substantive network plans and government submissions?

5   Can we get up-to-date, accurate data on the available locations within our footprint, with impact analysis, rates and overlays of critical infrastructure so we can defend against competitors' attempts to claim well-served areas that should be granted eligibility? This demands accurate location data with precision on the services that can be delivered.

6   Is the business-development team empowered to identify, engage and proactively work with underserved and unserved communities and rapidly create broadband investment and deployment options that meet their greatest needs and priorities? Can we be sure that these plans are accurate and actionable so that we earn trust through superb execution and avoid the failed expectations that have littered the landscape in the past? What is needed is fast, accurate, actionable broadband investments aligned with local communities' needs.

7   Finally, when we win grants, can our engineering team take those plans and immediately move to cost-effective, detailed design and construction? Or will they be forced to undertake massive replanning, costing the company and the community precious weeks, months and even years? Can the plans be integrated into all standard design tools we currently use, or do we need an upgrade?

CAUTION: USE COMMON SENSE

A strategic broadband expansion plan is a linchpin to the successful implementation of broadband for all deployment.

Caution and common sense are imperative, as deployers are limited and perhaps even at risk if the data and analysis are not accurate and if engineers cannot immediately integrate the data into design tools to complete construction.

Reputational issues are at stake, as are significant capex dollars. My recommendation is to make sure you can easily translate a strategic plan into a network deployed in the market so that you can realize your ROI for yourself, your employees, your investors and your community. ❖

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