

# Remember the Homecoming Dance?

Independent service providers still have relevant offerings for the multifamily industry.

By Bryan J. Rader / *UpStream Network*

I recently went to my first NMHC OPTECH conference in several years. OPTECH is a multifamily technology conference attended by property owners, vendors, consultants, lawyers, engineers and other experts.

As I walked into the main ballroom for the opening session, I wondered whether independent service providers were still relevant to this audience. After all, some owners have spent the past decade trying to bring “choice” to their residents. Others have focused on maximizing door fees or revenue share to bolster miscellaneous income.

Were the business plans of the independent guys still addressing the right needs for this market? Were we offering what they will want in the future? Could owners see past the massive trade show booths of the largest service providers at the front of the exhibit floor?

It’s an interesting time for multifamily owners. Occupancies remain at all-time highs. Rent levels are through the roof. And the onslaught of new construction supply seems to be met with more demand from millennials and empty nesters who crave the amenities and convenience of apartment living.

All I could think was, “Do we still fit in?” It’s that feeling you get when you are going to a high school reunion. “Will I recognize anyone? Will they recognize me? Will they remember any of our funny stories from gym class or the homecoming dance?”

There can’t be anything worse than showing up at a meeting offering something nobody wants. It’s like bringing a casserole dish to a potluck event and watching it sit untouched on the buffet table. Ugh – nobody wants it.

Luckily, this wasn’t even close to what happened at OPTECH. In the very first session, several of the large, publicly traded service providers discussed their products. You could hear yawns from the audience. “We deploy more fiber than anyone else here,” said one operator. “But you guys don’t really need fiber.”

Another provider talked about its new video services, and owners thought, “But my residents don’t watch traditional TV anymore.” My favorite comment came from an executive of a large phone company who tried to tell the developers in the room how they had to design their in-building wiring if they ever expected to receive this telco’s services. (One audience

member whispered, “Wow, that’s sort of arrogant.”)

So the bigs aren’t meeting owners’ needs. But what about the independents?

## INDEPENDENT PROVIDERS CAN DO THAT

Three core areas addressed throughout the conference are central to many independent operators’ plans.

In one session, large developers discussed their deployment of internet of things features in new apartment communities. They are adding digital locks, smart thermostats, appliance monitors, access control and even Alexa-type digital voice assistants. One consultant on the panel said, “I’m not telling you that you must offer bulk internet to connect all these devices, but it sure makes it easier.”

Hmmm. Independent providers do that.

In another session, participants discussed the need for communitywide wireless networks that can be customized to cover all amenity areas, residences and the office. One owner reported that its customers connect all their devices to the wireless platform, and they expect great speeds and a reliable connection. Smart TVs for streaming, tablets, phones, gaming consoles. The independents address this need, too!

In a third session, there was a broad discussion of the challenges of providing cellphone service in high-rise buildings. Some prospective residents won’t move into a building if they know that getting cell service will be a problem. One panelist said that deploying a private Wi-Fi system throughout the building can allow residents to utilize this network for cell service.

Aha! Score another win for the independents!

As I boarded my red-eye flight home, I revisited my initial question: Do today’s property owners want what we have? Do they remember the fun times from the homecoming dance?

Well, this conference confirmed that the answer is a resounding “yes”!

Best wishes for a prosperous 2018! ❖

*Bryan J. Rader is the president of UpStream Network, a broadband provider (formerly Access Media 3). Reach him at [brader@upstream.network](mailto:brader@upstream.network) or by phone at 314-540-1114.*