

The Art of the Comeback

How a multifamily service provider rebuilt its operation and reputation

By Michelle Malecki / *Access Media Holdings*

One of the first things visitors see when they enter Access Media Holdings' corporate offices in Oak Brook, Illinois, is a huge display board titled "The Art of the Comeback." This enormous space is filled with pictures of various multifamily buildings from around the United States. These buildings make up the customers that represent the next direction of the company's fortunes.

In each corner of the wall are examples of great comebacks in sports history. They illustrate what it takes to accomplish an amazing comeback. For example, there's a headline from when the Boston Red Sox came from three games behind to beat the New York Yankees in the 2004 playoffs. Another display shows the Patriots' amazing comeback in the 2017 Super Bowl when they overcame a 25-point second-half deficit to beat the Falcons.

"These sports stories are analogous to what's happening in our business today," says Access Media Holdings' new president, Bryan J. Rader, who joined the company in January. "The wall is symbolic of our overcoming the 25-point deficit. Each property is part of that comeback."

Access Media 3 Inc., founded in 2007, quickly became a leading provider of video, voice and data services in key markets across the United States through a dozen or so acquisitions. The company grew to serve more than 120,000 customers after acquiring providers in Texas, Florida, Virginia and California. It soon became the largest distributor of DIRECTV and had well over 1,200 MDU communities scattered across many states.

However, in July 2015, most Access Media 3 Inc. assets were purchased by Access Media Holdings in an Article 9 auction. The new company began the hard work of rebuilding a new corporate structure, management team and strategic direction.

DAUNTING CHALLENGES

It quickly became clear that, given all the past acquisitions, integrating these assets into a cohesive operational set, with consistent guidelines and quality measurements under new ownership, would be difficult.

"Given the broad geographic coverage, it was always going to be difficult to offer top-level service and support to all these communities," says Kelvin Fee, senior vice president of operations. Fee joined the company in 2015 from Wide Open West and drastically revised the operational foundation of the business.

In the process of acquiring other companies, Access Media had acquired a host of technologies and delivery mechanisms for digital TV, internet and phone. However, most of its focus was on digital TV.

"If you look at the assets acquired, Access Media Holdings had a large number of DIRECTV customers – some retail and some bulk," Rader explains. "Internet was not always offered."

These systems included analog, L band, DIRECTV MFH2 and many others. "We were like a restaurant that sold pizza in one location and fried chicken in another," says Arnie Guttenberg, business development manager in South Florida. "There were no consistencies, so it was hard to be great at any one of them."

“Our new company acquired several different operating systems with hundreds of price points and options,” says Mark McMaster, vice president of customer experience, who joined in 2014.

These difficulties led to significant operational challenges, including customer defections, financial weakness and poor employee loyalty.

“Even today, our acquired customers have many negative stories about the past they want to share,” says Alan Rosenberg, CEO. Rosenberg joined the company in mid-2015 to lead the formation of Access Media Holdings and begin the process of restructuring the assets and rebuilding the business model. The board brought him in to leverage his long experience in telecom turnarounds.

HALF-TIME ADJUSTMENTS

Rather than make a Hail Mary pass, Access Media Holdings chose to make half-time adjustments in search of the win. “Our adjustments included determining which markets we want to serve, which products we wanted to offer and how we were going to deliver those services,” says Rosenberg.

The new shareholder group of Access Media Holdings also realized an opportunity to strengthen the company’s operations and build a more efficient organization.

Over the past two years, Access Media Holdings restructured its entire organization to support its clients. It moved most of its field technicians and support in-house. It developed an in-house network operations center located in its corporate office. It streamlined its bandwidth purchasing and established a new national fiber backbone. Finally, it increased its customer care center’s scope to support on-site property management as well as end users.

These steps led to a 30 percent reduction in truck rolls, a 25 percent reduction in call volume and a very low rate of “go back” appointments. “We’ve continued to build our support team in the local markets and at the corporate office,” explains Fee.



The UpStream team attends the Rock n Road Show summer meeting, hosted at the Grand Plaza Apartments in Chicago.

IDENTIFYING A PRODUCT SET

These half-time adjustments were the perfect first step in building toward the comeback. The next step was identifying the right product set to meet the needs of the MDU market. The company had the largest scale in the industry with a strong presence in very MDU-heavy markets. It was in a great position to leverage its network to develop a new program.

In January 2017, industry veteran Bryan Rader joined the company to spearhead this opportunity. “I knew of the historical issues facing Access Media Holdings, as I had several clients who experienced some of their challenges,” Rader explains.

Last year, Access Media Holdings began laying the groundwork for a new platform to offer its residents. Stephanie Astor, director of business analytics, who also handles carrier relations, says,

Access Media's comeback required changes to operations, infrastructure, product offerings, customer service and support, business development and branding.

"We probably buy more bandwidth than any other private cable operator in the industry. We have dedicated fiber, fixed wireless and leased bandwidth capacity connecting hundreds of buildings in our markets to our national network." This backbone network formed the basis for launching the new program.

"Our view was that our 10-gigabit backbone network could be the basis for delivering the most advanced broadband experience to the multifamily industry," says Rader. "We knew it would require a lot of core competencies, such as a 24-hour in-house network operations center, redundancy in the network, direct connects to content sites such as Netflix, and service-level commitments far above industry norms."

A NEW BRAND

In spring 2017, Access Media hired a leading boutique branding agency in Chicago to assist it in developing a new brand and image to signal to the industry that the product, platform and company were all new. "What you once knew about the old company was no longer true," Rader says. The comeback was underway.

In late March, Access Media hosted a huge brand-reveal party for its entire team. The event generated energy and enthusiasm about the new brand and was highlighted with a keynote presentation by Greg O'Berry, a 30-year veteran of the apartment industry with JVM Realty and AMLI Residential. O'Berry described the new platform as "the right idea at the right time."

At the end of April, Access Media Holdings unveiled its exciting new brand, UpStream Network, to the entire

industry to overwhelmingly positive response. "I knew we had the right design and look when we showed the final version to the management team at Trump Plaza," Rader recalls. "They loved it and said they wanted to have the platform available for their residents."

"UpStream Network created a true amenity for our customer base, which demands top-of-the-line broadband service," says William Van Senus, Draper & Kramer property manager at Grand Plaza Apartments in Chicago, the first Chicagoland deployment for UpStream Network. "The company designed and upgraded our building infrastructure to offer all our residents a product that is more than three times faster than the rest of the market – and gave us amazing service during the process, too."

The expansion includes many other buildings in downtown Chicago, South Florida and other core Access Media Holdings markets. In July, the company launched UpStream in South Florida at Las Olas Condominium, a luxury condominium in Fort Lauderdale. The property management was thrilled to bring the platform to its residents. "It's always been a top-of-the-market community," says Rader. "With UpStream, it now has the technology amenities to match."

UpStream is more than just a platform. The team points to its many features – fiber backbone, fixed wireless, managed wireless delivery, all with speeds up to a gigabit. But it is also more than just an infrastructure. MDU owners and associations want their customers and residents to have the best broadband experience possible. Managing that experience is critical, and UpStream provides that solution.

"Many companies sell speed. Others sell price," Rader says. "We felt that we had to sell the experience. That means the infrastructure, the product delivery, the concierge support – all of it."

Access Media Holdings' comeback required more than building its operational base and launching a new brand. It required adding resources to support the entire experience. The company added several account managers to support new property launches and expanded its 24-hour, in-house network operations center. Now it has begun to expand its business development, adding associates with specific multifamily technology experience.

Access Media Holdings says its product has a road map to address the lifestyles of tomorrow's residents. UpStream's network will allow residents to connect thermostats, appliances and access control to create a true smart home.

"We see UpStream Network as a platform that meets the needs of today's MDU customers," Rader explains. "We are expanding it to dozens of properties within our current portfolio as well as many new ones."

Implementing the right game plan and executing successfully as a team is crucial to every comeback. Access Media Holdings' team sees its position in the same way as this year's Super Bowl. It is now the second half of the game, and it is closing the gap by scoring touchdowns and winning play after play. The comeback has gained significant momentum.

"The company is on a roll," Rader concludes. "We see the level of confidence that we're generating among our clients and the industry. We know people love a comeback. Our story certainly fits that description."

For Rader and the rest of the team, the comeback analogy seems perfect. Access Media was down three games to none several years ago. Today, it seems to be winning the game. ❖

Michelle Malecki is business development coordinator for Access Media Holdings LLC. Contact her at mmalecki@accessmedia3.com.