

The Power of Always On

The move-in process is easier for residents, property owners and service providers alike when residents can turn up internet service without a phone call or truck roll.

By Masha Zager / *Broadband Communities*

Turning on internet and TV service is just one more chore for new residents in the midst of packing, unpacking, changing mailing addresses and switching utility services. Waiting on hold to order service, living without service for days or weeks, then waiting at home for the “cable guy” to show up only adds to the stress associated with moving.

From providers’ point of view, turning up service for new residents is expensive and time-consuming, involving both office sales staff and field technicians. And leasing staff at apartment communities could do without residents’ complaints and queries about waiting for service.

That’s why property owners and service providers are looking for ways to make the process easier. In the last few years, several providers have developed “always-on” models that allow multiple-dwelling-unit (MDU) residents to activate service as soon as they get the keys to their new apartments.

One of these providers is CenturyLink, which introduced a service called InstaLink in 2014. The product evolved to become CenturyLink ON, which, as of the end of 2017, was provided to 259 properties and nearly 50,000 living units. The service is available only in greenfield buildings, largely because the building wiring must be set up in accordance with CenturyLink’s specifications.

To support CenturyLink ON, CenturyLink recommends fiber to the unit with a fiber distribution terminal on each floor and a combination optical network terminal (ONT)/ gateway in each living unit. This combination customer-premises device, which supports

both wired and wireless connectivity, is placed permanently inside a low-voltage wall panel; the preferred panel separates service provider equipment from subscriber equipment and has a vented plastic, rather than metallic, cover to enhance Wi-Fi reception. For hard-wired connections, the ONT’s Ethernet ports are cabled into the panel, connecting to a distribution block that enables internet and



A nonmetallic media panel reduces interference with Wi-Fi.

Revel Apartments, a new, upscale apartment community in Minneapolis, offers CenturyLink ON to residents.



IPTV service to all wall jacks in the living unit. The power source for the ONT/gateway may be inside or outside the media panel. CenturyLink recommends ruggedized, single-mode fiber within the building and Cat 5E or Cat 6 wiring within the units.

New residents who move into a building equipped with CenturyLink ON can immediately access a CenturyLink customer setup site from within their apartments via wired or Wi-Fi connection. Using a process similar to signing up for internet service in a hotel room, they create accounts, select the services they want (internet access, voice and/or IPTV) as well as the tier of services (up to 1 Gbps for internet access), and enter credit card billing information. Completing this process instantly activates their accounts.

REVEL APARTMENTS

Revel Apartments, a large, market-rate community with 125 units, opened in August in the heart of uptown

Minneapolis. “It’s an optimal location,” says Garret Duncan, regional property manager at North Bay Companies, which owns and manages the property. Aileen Kramer, senior account manager at CenturyLink, adds that the neighborhood, close to lakes and scenic views, has always been vibrant, but the addition of new apartment buildings, along with new bars and restaurants within walking distance, has attracted a lot of young people.

Young professionals and older empty-nesters make up the bulk of the residents at Revel, which boasts an outdoor pool, a hot tub, a game room, a common room and a gym.

Based on “a lot of research” and previous experience at other properties, the owner decided that CenturyLink ON would be the best solution for Revel. The selling points, says Duncan, were its ease of access for residents and fiber-to-the-unit architecture. The speed and reliability of fiber, as well as the



The combination ONT/gateway for CenturyLink ON

fact that everything was hooked up and ready to go, were key. “Residents don’t need to schedule a technician or run

any wires,” he explains. “All they have to do is set up an account.”

CenturyLink was involved with the developer from the beginning of the project, brought fiber to the building’s point of presence and consulted with the contractor about installation of the inside wiring. The one hiccup was that the building address was changed late in the game, which meant that CenturyLink had to re-enter data in its inventory system, reprint its marketing materials and re-establish the building connection to the 911 system. “That can be painful for all involved,” says Kramer. “Now we build our inventory differently.”

From Revel’s point of view, the move-ins went smoothly, and the building is now more than half full. Leasing agents talk to prospective residents about the ease of setting up their internet access, and they include forms in the move-in packet to explain the process. “It’s super simple, and it

doesn’t take long,” Duncan says. Of course, he adds, Revel’s residents tend to be tech-savvy; residents in other apartment communities may require more hand-holding, but they still don’t require technicians to set up the service for them.

Even without bulk service, Duncan says, virtually 100 percent of residents have signed up for internet service with CenturyLink. Take rates for TV service are age-dependent. Younger residents tend to be cord-nevers who stream video on their own schedules; the empty-nesters – whose generation grew up watching the evening news – tend to subscribe to video services. In the long run, Kramer thinks, interest in traditional video services will continue to decline, so “having the great internet connection is what’s future-proofing the building.”

Common-area Wi-Fi (through a separate network) is available

throughout the community, allowing residents to work on their laptops in the business center, read on their iPads at the pool or play music at events they host in the community room.

Prospective Revel residents are thrilled that they won’t have to take a day off work to set up internet and TV service, and current residents report satisfaction with internet speed, reliability and ease of access. Though CenturyLink provides the technical support, Duncan says, “I haven’t received reports of the internet being down or of any setup issues.”

As for the future, Duncan says North Bay plans to use fiber to the unit and CenturyLink ON in all its future developments. “It makes sense for this clientele,” he says. ♦

*Masha Zager is the editor of **BROADBAND COMMUNITIES**. You can reach her at masha@bbcmag.com.*

HOMETOWN SERVICE JUST GOT GIG

Over 130 small broadband providers in our country’s heartland are putting their communities first by delivering the internet’s fastest speeds and building a better future for rural America.



Find a gigabit-capable provider near you at ntca.org/gigcertified

