

Boring Isn't Bad

Independent providers shouldn't aim for being a little bit better. They should understand owners' problems and solve them.

By Bryan J. Rader / *UpStream Network*

When Elon Musk founded The Boring Company in 2016, he set out to provide a specific solution to a very real problem: rush hour traffic. In Los Angeles, commuters spend, on average, 102 hours a year stuck in traffic – the highest average in the world. There are 7.8 million registered cars in the L.A. area, and they all want to jump on the 405 at 4:30 in the afternoon.

The problem is bigger than just traffic. It impacts citizens' quality of life, degrades the environment, makes people miss appointments, causes safety issues and much more.

To solve this quarter-century-long problem, Musk proposed building a tunnel 30 feet wide and 50-plus feet deep that electric cars or people movers could use to transport passengers underneath the city to various highly congested destinations. He believes the tunnels could allow people to move at up to 150 miles an hour, reducing commute time to sheer minutes each day.

Chicago loved this solution. The City Council signed a deal this year with The Boring Company to consider a tunnel from downtown Chicago to O'Hare Airport, reducing a 90-minute rush-hour trip to just 12 minutes.

My point isn't that independent broadband providers should find a way to sell underground Wi-Fi to passengers in these tunnels (although it's not a bad idea!). My point is that we should use Elon Musk's thought process when we think about our business.

What problem are we actually trying to solve? What solution are we really delivering to an apartment owner or a condo board?

So often, I see service providers come to market with their mix of tricks ready to take the world by storm. When I was a consultant, I met a lot of them. "We offer a better product than Comcast," they said.

"Yes, but how is that really solving your customer's problem?" I asked.

"Well, you know, we are faster and cheaper than the big guys," many of them responded.

Really? That's your solution? Is it sustainable? Lately, I've seen some of the big operators increase their speeds and lower their introductory pricing. So what problem are you really tackling?

The Boring Company set out with a very real fix to a very real problem. Service providers should try to do the same thing.

DIGGING DEEPER

Dig a little deeper than just "faster and cheaper." McDonald's is faster and cheaper than most restaurants, but it had to completely revamp its menu, get into the coffee business and reshape its stores to give customers a real solution. What's ours?

Our clients have many problems we address every day. They are looking for secure networks that can support the fast-growing internet of things. They don't want to give their retired residents complicated set-top boxes with confusing remotes. Their communities have fitness centers and clubhouses desperate for solid Wi-Fi coverage. Student housing owners need ubiquitous wireless coverage throughout entire communities for highly mobile students. For some, this is more important than L.A.'s traffic problems.

And independent providers can deliver solutions. We have the best options for these problems and have spent years developing optimal solutions for these situations. This is much better than just being "faster and cheaper."

We have to stop looking at our businesses with the view that we have to be a bit faster and a few dollars cheaper to win. That strategy is like lowering the bus fare in Los Angeles. We have to dig deeper, as Elon Musk has with The Boring Company, to solve real problems in MDUs.

This alternative strategy might be "boring," but it can be very successful. ❖

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