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Building Broadband Networks in the Post-COVID Era



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Jim Kane is the VP of Sales and Product Management at Amphenol Broadband Solutions, guiding the company's sales and product implementation strategy. In his 20+ years in the broadband industry, he has held leadership positions in sales and business development. Amphenol Broadband Solutions is a global leader in communication technology development specializing in the engineering and manufacturing of cable, RF equipment, fiber optic products, OSP enclosures and wireless products.

The passage of time is marked by significant historical events: JFK, Y2K, 9/11. Most recently we have entered the post-COVID era. In some cases, such as Y2K, service providers were able to prepare for possible disruptions caused by equipment that would interpret the two-digit year (00) as 1900 rather than 2000. Other situations did not allow planning, instead the industry found ways to rapidly adapt to the changing business environment. This was experienced throughout the pandemic and its ongoing supply chain challenges. Two important lessons emerged over the past two years that will continue to serve us going forward: simplicity and flexibility.

Simplicity

With speed being a key element of broadband communications, a simple approach to building networks makes the most sense. Simplifying products to meet the broadest of applications is a way that suppliers can assist in meeting exploding demand.

Henry Ford famously said, "You can get the Model-T in any color, as long as it's black." While this statement seems to suggest a lack of customer focus, the truth is that it reflected the reality of early production line manufacturing. In attempting to meet an explosion of demand a vendor may simplify its efforts by building a single product that meets the greatest swath of needs across a broad spectrum of many customers. In other words, the product will meet the customer's service demand, while not necessarily being available in the first choice of color or other features.

Knowledgeable broadband equipment vendors will follow this example to help meet demands brought on by current supply chain

issues. These have been compounded by the added challenge of bringing broadband service to rural subscribers as part of RDOF and other broadband funding programs.

But simple products alone will not get the industry to the level of buildout necessary to meet our collective goal. Further simplification can occur using key suppliers that not only bring a single product to address the problem but can bring multiple parts or maybe even an entire solution to the table, thereby streamlining the service provider's task. Vendors that draw on their deep experience and broad knowledge can assist providers in meeting the growing demands of a bandwidth-hungry market.

Flexibility

Going together with simplicity is the need for flexibility on the part of the broadband service provider. As the owner of a network, the provider holds ultimate responsibility for its operation and ability to provide services. The service provider builds its network to provide broadband services efficiently, fairly and safely, while still trying to meet the aggressive deployment goals imposed on them.

Savvy service providers will be open to the product offered by a vendor that meets intended service needs, even though it may not have all the features the network operator desires. For example, an outside plant housing may not be available in the desired color or exact version in a reasonable timeframe but can be delivered in higher volumes in another color or form factor in a shorter interval.

Finally, service providers can increase their odds of success in obtaining needed materials by preparing short- and long-range production-based forecasts that reflect their best estimation of needs. Chosen vendors should confidently build to those needs with a reasonable expectation that purchases will follow per this forecast. By so doing, service providers and their strategic vendor partner can more closely manage raw material and logistics costs in a highly volatile environment.

As supply chain issues continue, the lessons of simplicity and flexibility will help our industry to continue to build the broadband networks that will allow our country to meet the challenges of today and tomorrow.



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