

Charter Plays Catch-Up with Managed WiFi

New open source-based application is reportedly in employee trials



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Comcast's xFi solution, in the market for more than two years, has become a benchmark home WiFi product.

WHY THIS MATTERS

More cable operators are looking to add managed WiFi features that help subs troubleshoot problems, avoid security breaches and improve the overall broadband experience.

COMCAST HAS ROLLED OUT a new iteration of its WiFi management and security tool, xFi, that lets Xfinity broadband customers cut off their kids from the home internet once they've surpassed a certain threshold of usage time.

The xFi software product includes a whole host of WiFi optimization features, not to mention a user-friendly smartphone app interface. It's been on the market for more than two years now and has become the benchmark for smaller cable companies looking to also own the home WiFi experience.

"There's a lot to like about Comcast's xFi solution," said Jeremy Hltchcock, founder and CEO of Minim, which makes WiFi and security software that goes into Motorola-branded modems

made by Zoom Telephonics, as well as those made by Sercomm. "Smaller operators need those kinds of capabilities, too, but if you're not Comcast, you probably don't have the resources to build them yourself."

Indeed, even tier 2 and 3 cable operators have recognized that their end of the network doesn't end where the cable meets the box anymore.

"A lot of operators asking how can I expand what I do," said Hitchcock, noting that MSOs want "visibility" into the home, to better troubleshoot problems, avoid security breaches and create an overall improved broadband experience for their customers that will reduce churn and maximize average revenue per customer.

Notably absent from the managed WiFi discussion has been Charter Communications, the second-biggest U.S. cable provider. But that could soon change.

Light Reading unearthed what it said was a webpage that described a Charter employee trial of a new managed WiFi application. According to the report, the router software platform being tested would enable subscribers to manage the in-home WiFi network via smartphone apps, allowing them to "pause" the internet connection on any device connected to the home network.

According to the report, Charter would based its managed WiFi platform not on the Reference Design Kit (RDK) that underpins xFi, but on Prpl, another open-source software platform.

By the time *B&C* visited the link, though, the reference to the employee trial — said by *Light Reading* to be "hiding in plain sight" — had disappeared. A Charter rep said, "We're declining comment for this story." ❏

CableLabs Expands the Tent with 'Outward-Facing' Event

UNDER THE DIRECTION of former Hewlett Packard technologist Phil McKinney since 2012, CableLabs has broadened its mission to not only develop next-generation broadband network technologies, but enhance the overall vision of how these advances could change the way we live, love, eat and work in the near-term future.

With that in mind, the cable-industry technology consortium has launched the fourth installment of its short video series, titled "The Near Future." It's also replacing its cable industry-only Summer Conference with an ambitiously open event it says will draw 1,500 attendees to Denver on June 22-23 of next year, 4Front.

"The goal is to bring these innovators together to drive different conversation around innovation and answer the question, what does that three to eight years out look like?" McKinney said in an interview. "We want other people to get in the room with us."

He describes 4Front as an "outward-facing event," relative to the more "inward-facing" Summer Conference.

CableLabs is targeting more than 150 executive speakers from more than 100 companies situated in 20 countries around the world. Nineteen hours of sessions will be delivered from June 23-24 at the Gaylord Rockies Event and Convention Center.

The discussion at 4Front will be built around four themes: Live (which includes tips like health care), Learn (education), Work (collaborative tech) and Play (video entertainment and gaming). The event won't feature an exhibition hall with booth space.

"Obviously we'll be talking about the 10G networks," McKinney said. "We're going to create the best plat-

form for others to innovate on top of. The question we'll be asking is, 'What do those innovations look like?'"

CableLabs held its Summer Conference last week in Keystone, Colorado, but said that was the event's final go-around. It had already eliminated its Winter Conference several years ago. Cable still has a big annual tech event in the SCTE/ISBE Cable-Tec Expo, McKinney noted.

In conjunction with the 4Front announcement, CableLabs also debuted the fourth installment in its four-film *The Near Future* series, which showcases applications that will be emerging or somewhat ubiquitous three to eight years from now, and how our work, home and social lives will be transformed by them.

McKinney has worked with the same small cadre of filmmakers since

his days as HP CTO under Carly Fiorina. Three years ago, this group began shooting short experiential vignettes, examining how technologies currently consigned to labs and trials will change everyday life in the, well, near-term future.

The latest vignette, titled "Diverse Thinkers Wanted," is the most challenging to date, attempting to showcase not just how technologies like light-field display and AI will change the way we collaborate at work, but how this world will self-initiate to meet our needs before we make the ask.

The video's protagonist, a young woman sent to an unfamiliar city to deliver a presentation, finds herself being unwittingly tested by a prospective client. It's this woman's ability to thoughtfully and creatively interact with the various next-generation technologies at her disposal that passes the test and wins her company the contract. — DF

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