

Two Sides to

Sandy Says: MSOs Are Late in Deploying Multiroom DVR



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A telecom industry veteran, Sandy spent 18 years with AT&T before moving to the broadband world. She joined her husband Dave Waks in their consultancy, System Dynamics, in 1996 and has been focused on consumer broadband ever since.

Sandy splits her time between consulting, co-writing a monthly report on new broadband developments, and being a Skype video-addicted grandmother.

I'm usually pretty ruthless in tossing the piles of direct mail that keep appearing in our mailbox, but a recent mailing from Verizon caught my attention. It made a strong pitch for FiOS multiroom DVRs, emphasizing that you couldn't get that capability from your cable company. It also had one of those introductory deals that make saying "yes" seem pretty painless.

Since Dave and I write about new broadband-related products, we already have three DVRs. We can record programs on any of them, but can view the recorded programs only in the specific room and on the specific TV set each is connected to.

So Verizon's idea of being able to record programs in one room and view them on any other TV set sounds pretty sweet. We'd be delighted to abandon our old systems if the new one had the capabilities and ease of use we wanted. But we'd also have to abandon cable for FiOS. The telco competition is offering multiroom DVR as a differentiating feature from cable. They are heavily promoting the perception that multiroom DVR is a "gotta-have" feature. Verizon has had it in SD for two years (HD was a recent addition) and AT&T rolled it out nationally toward the end of 2008.

Why have MSOs been so slow to offer a similar capability? The industry has been talking about it and their suppliers have had it for years. We first wrote about Ucentric in November 2001, when all that existed was chartware; by January 2005, Motorola had acquired Ucentric and was pushing to make multiroom DVR a deployed reality for MSOs. Digeo has offered its Moxi Media Center DVR and "Moxi Mate" remote boxes for more than three years, and Cisco has had its own multiroom DVR for more than two years.

The uptake of DVRs has proven there is consumer demand. The rapid uptake of flat screen TV sets is driving the need for HD set-top boxes. But

people don't want to install full-size DVR boxes at each TV set — they cost too much and take up too much space. Many flat screens are mounted on the wall — where will the box go? With more sources of content than ever before, families want to record once and watch anywhere, not have duplicate copies in several rooms.

A handful of MSOs — mainly Charter, but also BendBroadband and Sunflower — have deployed Digeo's Moxi multiroom system. With Digeo now offering retail DVRs, you can bet that retail versions with distinctive UIs and multiroom capabilities will provide another option for consumers. Users with several TiVo DVRs can record a show on one and watch it on another; they also can start a movie in the living room and finish it in the bedroom.

Major providers like Comcast have acknowledged the importance of multiroom capabilities, but the offerings we are aware of are quite limited. For example, Comcast subscribers in New Jersey and Boston with Motorola STBs are able to start on-demand content in one room and then view it in other rooms on TV sets equipped with digital STBs. But this "Comcast AnyRoom" service is just for on-demand content; it does not provide multiroom DVR.

The underlying capabilities for providing multiroom DVR have been available for a while and have gotten more cost-effective. The latest Broadcom chips provide enormous amounts of functionality in a single package. Today's hard drive technology for the home makes storage technologies of 10 years ago look primitive. Coaxial cables already connect all TV sets in the home; the MoCA home networking technology is specifically targeted for carrying multiple streams of high-definition video between STBs, and Verizon has proven that it works well in customer homes.

Multiroom DVR is a must-offer video capability. Existing cable customers would be disposed to stay with cable if the capability were available. The customer who wants it now has no choice but to switch, leaving their cable provider behind.



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