

A Duck Out of Water?

This evangelist for broadband says understanding users is her biggest asset

By Hilda Gay Legg ■ *Consultant*

As I stood in the middle of the exhibits, rich and complex with engineering feats, solutions and new ideas, I could not help but ask myself, “Why am I here?”

Why is a former school teacher, from a small rural community, a sociology major interested in people (not gadgets), standing here in the middle of these math and science geniuses thinking she belongs?

Growing up on a small family farm where both parents had to work outside the home by day and on the farm on nights and weekends, where parents always worked for someone else, why was I here among successful entrepreneurs, CEOs of telecom companies, and savvy, experienced, highly driven marketers and sales people? Should I have been thinking that I, too, belonged to this group? How could I be such a duck out of water?

While I am fascinated with all the gadgets, and enjoy looking at fiber being made, I’d much rather be sitting with you over a cup of coffee. There is nothing better than conversing with a real live person!

Maybe I did not belong here, I mean really! This Broadband Properties Summit was filled with thoughtful experts who understand how my email gets to my friends. I struggled with this question as I tried to prepare for the session for which I was the moderator the following day.

Oh yeah, did I mention that the focus of my session was on financing your broadband project, and that I had just transferred money from my savings to my checking account right before I left home because I can’t seem to balance

my own checkbook? Yet I’m leading a discussion on business plans, lending terms, bond options, and so forth.

A duck out of water, indeed. And the water was frigid! Then it began to warm.

A Little Personal History

I have been involved in trying to lure jobs and stimulate economic growth in rural communities for over 15 years. I tried, for instance, to give away video conferencing sites in rural eastern Kentucky a decade ago when a load of good white rock was more highly valued than a T1 line! Somebody has to make these gadgets!

Rural communities have a good work ethic attractive to businesses no matter the degree of advanced technology in the product to be manufactured. But trying to bring jobs to rural areas, I have often been hit with the greater cost of doing business in remote locales and why the business projections simply would not support putting that plant in a small town.

Business plans can be pretty brutal about putting reality in the spotlight. And yes, I also remembered when I had lots of money but few takers, because the business plan would not support the cash flow no matter how great the need or desire! (Well, I didn’t have the money myself. I was in charge of distributing millions of federal grant dollars in a responsible way.)

The Three A’s of Technology

Once a teacher always a teacher! I had written a speech years ago called the three A’s of technology. It said that people must first be *Aware* of what technol-



The Honorable Hilda Gay Legg delivers a speech at this year’s BBP Summit.

ogy was and what it could do. Secondly, people must have *Access*, and be able to touch it, feel it and get comfortable with it. Then lastly, I believed that if people were *Aware*, and had *Access*, the third A would come from their intrinsic creativity and curiosity, which were the *Applications*.

People will learn to use broadband to help themselves either financially or to enhance their quality of life. Standing there surrounded by wires, strands of fiber and simulators of various sorts, I realized, I still believe in the 3 A’s of Technology. I believe in people! The water was getting warmer!

Okay, I said to myself, I’ve been a promoter and marketer of technology as an economic development tool. I’d been a reviewer of many a business plan and financial projection as a lender of the

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taxpayers' money. As a sociology major and as a teacher, I had tried to reach people with the understanding of what and how their lives could be improved with advanced high speed connectivity.

I'm a mother, too. In five short years I have learned that nothing, absolutely nothing can compare with the primal desire that mothers have for their offspring to be protected and provided for optimally. (Fathers may have it too; I can only speak as a mother.)

My son's future, your sons' and daughters' future, yes our country's future depends upon him personally and his peers in all communities throughout this great land having access to the most

advanced technology this country can produce and deploy. Every facet of our society – and I mean *every* facet – will be more productive and better because of technology.

Then it dawned on me. It's not about the wires or signals or airwaves, nor the dollars and business plans, but rather about what they can do for the people.

And people, well I know a little about people. I had studied them in college, taught them in school, managed a few hundred along the way and tried to serve them as the steward of their hard-earned tax dollars. And of course I have lived beside them both in the countryside and in the cities, and

they are good! Then the ultimate test, I am trying to raise one of those good people. While the jury is still out as he is only five years old, he can only reach his optimal potential when, to quote President Bush, "every American has access to broadband connectivity."

When every child can have *Access*, and our schools are making them at least *Aware* by building new *Applications*, only then will we as a country begin the climb back up in the global marketplace.

Yeah, I believe and I belong here, it's just where I need to be! **BBP**

About the Author

Hilda Gay Legg was the 15th administrator of the USDA Rural Utilities Service. She's a great evangelist for broadband, and an accomplished consultant. Anyone who has ever heard her speak will imagine every sentence in this article punctuated with an explanation point. She can be reached at hildalegg@yahoo.com.

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