New FTTH Certification Will Benefit The Public

By Steven S. Ross ■ *Editor-in-Chief*

The FTTH Council took a giant step toward greater public understanding of fiber optic technology's value proposition last month, with establishment of a certification program for FTTH homes. We've heard some grumbling, but we applaud the Council (www.FTTHCouncil.org) and advise it to stay the course.

The Council's FTTH badge is tough to get. To qualify, a home must be served by "a telecommunications architecture in which a communications path is provided over optical fiber cables extending from the telecommunications operator's switching equipment to (at least) the boundary of the home living space or business office space (the side of the building or unit). This communications path is provided for the purpose of carrying telecommunications traffic to one or more subscribers and for delivering one or more services (for example Internet access, telephony and/or video-television)."

There are other qualifications as well. A service provider seeking certification must confirm that it is serving revenue-paying subscribers over its network, for instance, and must show a high level of commitment to network-wide FTTH deployment. The threshold is 10 percent, defined by dividing **homes passed** by fiber (the total number of residential households in the provider's service area to whom services can be marketed over FTTH) by **total residential communication subscribers** (that is, total households subscribing to voice, data or video services, served by the provider's entire wireline network).

The 10 percent minimum is meant to show that a service provider is "strategically committed" to FTTH access.

Certified homes can carry the FTTH Council badge. Verizon and Zoomy Communications are the first service providers to be certified.

The Goal

The FTTH Council program is designed to differentiate between true FTTH and Fiber-to-the-Neighborhood, Fiber-to-the-Curb, DSL, DOCSIS, and other technologies that don't offer as much bandwidth, flexibility, and future-proofing. The average consumer, of course, cannot be expected to know the difference, until he or she tries to connect two HDTV sets while Junior is uploading a video and running a multiplayer interactive game with a friend on the other side of the country.

As the Council says, "Just because there's fiber somewhere in a network, doesn't mean that the network delivers the benefits of FTTH. Fiber delivers unlimited speed and capacity – but once the fiber hits the old copper, speed, capacity and benefits hit limits. FTTH is the best way to bring the revolutionary experience of broadband directly to the consumer.

"Only FTTH offers consumers the fastest Internet and TV connections with no limitations. The benefit isn't just about speed – it's about the unlimited capacity of fiber to carry large files, such as leading-edge games, movies, music and photographs – as well as medical images and multimedia programming for distance learning. Fiber shatters the limitations we've come to expect from older technologies. FTTH is good for communities. "Anything else is embracing the inferior."

The idea, of course, is that once consumers get used to the idea, they will ask for true FTTH in even greater numbers than is the case now. So might investors, including mortgage bankers.

The Gripes

It did not take long for the gripes to start, even though it seems obvious that the FTTH Council, which is not charging for its badge, is not likely to be looking at super-fine distinctions when it comes to system technology. We've heard from vendors, developers, and municipal officials who worry that:

- "Fiber all the way to the outside wall of the living unit" is too strict a standard. There are indeed "fiber to the basement" (FTTB) installations that deliver 1 Gbps to living units via coax, for instance. And Verizon itself does not expect all of its MDU installations to have an ONT for each living unit, either. Should other property owners and service providers be denied a badge if their systems exceeded Verizon's worst but still were not true FTTH? The FTTH Council at this point apparently wants to be deliberately vague on that.

- Some innovative installs, such as the Interfibra fiber-to-the-pedestal deployment in Monterrey Mexico we lauded last June (and with a Cornerstone award at our Broadband Summit in September; see this issue for details) would not qualify, at least not automatically. There, Ethernet carries the bandwidth from each pedestal to up to eight nearby homes on small lots.

- Subscribers base their decisions on bandwidth, not the carriers' difficulty tweaking their non-FTTH systems to deliver it. In Korea, for instance, there's a government-supervised "star" rating included with real estate listings – the more stars, the more bandwidth. The Korean ratings are technology-agnostic.

We do not find the arguments persuasive. Korea has had years to educate its population on the virtues of broadband access, and consumers there know what they are getting. Halfway measures like FTTB may be acceptable in many cases, but require more maintenance and are less future-proof. Consumers should be warned about that, just as they are told that they might be getting a 15-year roof on the house rather than a 30-year. Absence of the FTTH badge should be a warning. And, obviously, the FTTH Council should be pushing fiber – it's in their name. **BBP**

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