

Want FiOS from Your Cable Company? Motorola Can Help

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While cable head-end equipment isn't necessarily something that consumers think about, this week at the Cable Show in Las Vegas, infrastructure suppliers like Cox, Comcast, and others are thinking about how to add services.

While cable providers are generally able to offer higher throughput than their DSL rivals -- at least here in the United States -- cable companies also have to consider how they will deal with their legacy coaxial cable while still shifting toward higher-bandwidth solutions. Their chief rival? Verizon's FiOS fiber-optic broadband, whose lightning-quick offerings easily trump anything cable companies can currently offer.

Until now, however. What Motorola's announcement means is that the company will allow cable companies to also add fiber upgrades, perhaps as a premium upgrade to a new housing development that's surrounded by cable-only service.

Furthermore, the industry is expected to demonstrate download speeds of greater than 100 Mbits per second this week. The Data Over Cable Services Interface Specification (DOCSIS) are specifications for cable modems; the third generation, DOCSIS 3.0, is in the final stages of development.

In a traditional cable setting, cable companies will lay fiber optic technology to local cable companies and then finish off that "last mile" to the actual development with more affordable coaxial cables. Those coaxial cables, however, cannot usually handle as much bandwidth as fiber optic cables.

The cable PON offering allows providers building cable networks to simultaneously install fiber networks, and activate both networks at their discretion using the same equipment and systems operations, according to Motorola.

Some providers, most notably Verizon and its FiOS service, are investing in networks that deliver fiber directly to the home (FTTH), but this is a labor intensive and extremely expensive undertaking. Technically, cable companies could put in fiber while they're digging trenches for their coaxial cables, but coaxial and fiber networks have, until now, used different equipment and systems operations, so it's not cost effective.

Companies do not have to immediately switch on the fiber capabilities, but given the growing popularity of the technology, there is an incentive for cable companies to install this technology if they can use it at a later date without incurring additional equipment or systems costs, said Floyd Wagoner, senior manager for marketing for Motorola's Access Network.

"It is still a wise investment to put fiber in the ground," Wagoner said. "Cable service providers ... can port over to the PON solution tomorrow."

Motorola has a lot of interest from tier-one cable companies that are competing for development deals, Wagoner said. Many times, a housing development or apartment building contractor will select one provider to service all units, and the ability to provide fiber has become an attractive asset, he said.

Wagoner stressed that Cable PON is "incremental" to Motorola's suite of products and just one connection option. He doesn't see an "arbitrary or wholesale" move toward fiber at this point because of the many options that exist, but there is an interest from "cable companies looking to alternative technologies because of a competitive environment," he said.

"We don't see - PON - as a solution; we see it as an option we bring our customers," Wagoner said. "We can give them a natural extension of their cable services."

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