

Retailers and the Wireless Revolution

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To survive and prosper, the owner of a retail business has to be ready for the next innovation -- the latest fashion, food or newest technology -- or customers are sure to shop elsewhere. In some cases (think of that small mom-and-pop store in rural Ohio), adapting to the latest technology can be prohibitively expensive.

But a revolution is coming that might give every retailer that ability.

The broadband wireless revolution is a once-in-a-generation economic shift that could not only enhance productivity but increase equality and opportunity. Mobile phones and devices we use to communicate are growing smarter, able to handle high-speed data transmissions and run applications like full-size computers.

The smart-phone trend isn't news to most Americans, but its pace may be: in 2009, 23% of mobile phones were smart phones; in 2010, 31% ; and today, more than half of all mobile phones sold are smart phones.

In addition to emails, texts, live video feeds and other applications, wireless broadband devices allow a consumer to not only compare prices while standing in a store but also purchase that product from another store with the push of a button. In a sense, high-speed Internet anywhere, anytime levels the information playing field between the smallest store in southern Ohio to the biggest in any of our major cities – but only if broadband signals are available anywhere.

The demand for wireless data is expected to increase 40-fold in the next four years alone as American businesses and individuals increasingly relying on high-speed wireless in every aspect of their lives. However, it is becoming clear that the current wireless infrastructure cannot handle the oncoming demand. We need more reliable broadband wireless capacity.

There is hope out there. Just like retailers adjust to better serve consumers, innovative wireless providers are stepping forward to offer more broadband capacity – companies like LightSquared, which has proposed a new \$14 billion national wireless network that would give 260 million Americans next-generation wireless service (known as 4G-LTE) by 2015. This could be the life raft many retailers in rural Ohio need during these tough economic times.

As sometimes happens in a revolution, the established insiders are trying to stop it. Users of certain GPS receivers complain that they might pick up LightSquared's nearby signal, but experts say these technical problems can be easily fixed and that this is no reason to stand in the way of true progress.

LightSquared is but one example of the type of innovation broadband wireless needs. Clearwire is another company looking to offer retail and wholesale service through an expanding network – all of which will benefit consumers and, in turn, benefit retailers right here in Ohio. Other providers are using WiMAX to deliver wireless broadband to more people. But they need regulatory approval and political support to move forward.

Congress and the Obama Administration can take a stand for innovation and small business owners by supporting new wireless broadband providers who are investing in America's future. Progress often pits the advocates of status quo against the innovators – a lesson well known to retail business owners, who are among the best at embracing change. The impending crisis in broadband-wireless bandwidth has made clear the importance of change, and it's the kind of change that elected officials who campaigned on its moniker could and should deliver.

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