



Interview with Rob Chambers

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By Melissa Cogavin, Managing Editor, SCTE

Connected Britain is now in its eighth year and has firmly cemented itself as the go-to event for anyone involved in the UK fibre industry. We caught up with Rob Chambers, Managing Director of Total Telecom, who shares with us the secret behind the show's success.

What are the themes of this year's show? You're moving to a new venue this year – the ExCel. It's quite a change from where you've been before.



**Rob Chambers,
Connected Britain**

RC: It is an incredible venue, and an incredible change. This is the eighth show. When we launched, it was in a hotel ballroom, the Jumeirah Carlton Tower in Knightsbridge. We had about 300 people, and about a dozen exhibitors. We thought that was quite good at the time.

You just never know how these things are going to pan out. What was the thinking behind the latest move?

RC: We went through a few larger hotel venues in between. We were lucky in the sense that we have pretty much doubled in size, year-on-year, for quite a few years. It was only last year that we'd moved into taking over the entire Business Design Centre. It's a great location, an a gorgeous venue. It's got a

great feel about it. But it's not very big, 6000 square metres all in. Last year every inch of that was full; we just couldn't accommodate any more in there.

How will the Excel be different?

RC: The step to the ExCel is perfectly logical. It is a very different kind of venue. It's a great location and it's an out-and-out exhibition centre, purpose built for its job. We've got 13,000 square metres now. We've obviously got a lot more exhibitors there this year as a result. Once you take exhibitors, sponsors, startups and partners, I think there's going to be close on 400 companies. We're looking at over 5,000 attendees.

You've made amazing progress in a short space of time. It does seem it's the right place, right time that you launched this show, just as the rollout was starting to happen. You definitely captured it.

RC: It's not just about building networks either. Most companies who exhibit are involved in the build of networks. But when you actually start looking at the attendees, it's far

broader and the agenda reflects that. The most obvious theme is the project rollout, the nuts and bolts of building the network. What you do with the network though is really where the event's evolved. As a show we are very agnostic about what kind of technology it is, whether it's fibre, or whether it's wireless technologies. I don't think that matters. I don't think to the user it should matter. They just want something that works.

It's about customer services as well. That's a big part of it now.

RC: It's customer service, it's how you close the digital divide. It's about what people do with it, work, pleasure or public services being digitally enabled. It's bringing those things together, it's about the skills gaps, both for the public, but also for the industry and how you can close those skill gaps. I think the debate has moved on; increasingly we're hearing companies saying, 'well, what about when you get in the premises, or inside the building?' Or if it's a venue, or a stadium, or something like that when you get inside the stadium? So the actual experience delivers on the promise of having strong connectivity to the venue.

The consumer doesn't care how that's done. They just want it to work. We've all been in stadium situations where connectivity fails because there's too many people. The network can't cope.

RC: Quite right. Events, normally.

I hope you've got a good broadband provider...

RC: Ironically that one's normally out of our control. From the public's point of view, they shouldn't have to think about it, should they? You should be able to leave your house, be on the network, get in the car, go somewhere, still be on the network. Get to work, or get to the shopping centre, still be on the network; it should all be seamless. That should be the end game. We're still quite a way from achieving that. Compared to other markets we are some way behind the curve, but there's a will, demand and the finance in some shape of form, to improve it.

What's different on the editorial side this year?

RC: Connected communities is a new track for 2023; looking at connecting rural and hard to reach communities with focus

on things like social housing, schools, critical services and so on. Obviously, sustainability is a growing issue for everyone; we've got some panel discussions on sustainability around digital infrastructure and reaching net-zero.

We've got some things as well about the network rollout. A few years ago, everyone was talking about ways to supercharge the existing copper infrastructure they had. You don't often hear that now. They're mostly talking about replacing copper infrastructure and switching off of old legacy networks.

There's the development of 5G and use-cases for this from businesses, the health sector and so on. We're starting to see real deployments, rather than just interesting test cases. 5G hasn't actually dominated the market perhaps in quite the way that people would've expected.

A year ago people were really excited about 5G, and what a game changer it was going to be. That hasn't quite happened - everyone's talking about AI now.

RC: It is all about AI, isn't it? I'm sure that in a year or so's time, even that will be moving on a little bit.

The telecoms industry has always been fantastic at talking about the next big thing. One of the biggest changes is the shift from there being a quite distinct set of telecom vendors, and a separate set of IT vendors, and now we're actually seeing that it's all converging into one space. They are by and large the same companies now.

I think it's also interesting when you look at how the whole product landscape has changed as well. The distinction between vendors and operators and how they interact with customers in particular, with business and enterprise customers has changed as well. They're often competing with each other in that space. That includes the big integrators because they're all basically offering different ways of applying similar solutions to customers.

It must be challenging to be at the forefront of an industry that is moving so fast.

RC: The biggest challenge for my team is ensuring things go forward, that we evolve as a show. It's always a challenge to move the debate on. It's important to be listening to what the industry's saying to us, what people think the next big trends are. And that is the skill of our producers and their knowledge



of the market in backing the right horses. Sometimes you're having to go out slightly on a limb; start talking about a subject which maybe isn't that topical yet. But hopefully by the time the show comes, people have started hearing about it. And we're thinking, actually, that is becoming quite important.

Presumably sometimes contentious subjects come up that aren't easy to discuss, like Brexit, and it's up to the show to address it. It's the elephant in the room.

RC: Correct. Obviously supply chain issues being a big one. And they're still rattling around. Obviously, the impact of doing less business with some of the Chinese companies is hitting a lot of the operators quite hard.

Confidence in our industry currently is maybe not quite what it was two years ago. There is a lot of talk of consolidation now, investment drying up. The economy is shaky. I wonder how that might impact you as a provider of an event that you're trying to scale up. How might that impact your show?

RC: There's consolidation in two areas. On one hand, you've got the one that everyone's talking about. You've got consolidation amongst the alt-nets, inevitable in some ways. There were so many of them.

On the other hand, there were smaller alt-nets that emerged out there, some of which could almost be seen as opportunistic. They were probably always going to find it harder to raise finance, especially if they were going into areas that are already being well-built by some of the bigger players. Or they haven't got a clear point of differentiation as to what they're offering, compared to competitors out there. Costs of finance are obviously going up. People are being more cautious about what they invest in.

And as for the future?

RC: People will continue to invest in companies where there is a good long-term business model. I don't think that it's going to directly impact on the event, or the number of people who come to the event. There's more caution, rather than things not happening. The industry will continue to be driven forward

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by demand, and by its momentum. Smaller companies will have to continue to work harder to find finance, perhaps to put forward a better business case for why people should be backing them.

What about on the vendor side?

RC: There are quite a few instances of smaller specialist companies becoming part of bigger groups. That potentially takes some companies off the floor plan, as such. And they might suddenly start having one larger stand for four or five companies, instead of four or five smaller stands.

There is a lot of that happening. A sign of a maturing market.

RC: But they’ll still be offset by new companies that are coming into the space, and different types of companies.

Many technical companies were started by engineers, who don’t generally think like marketeers, just as marketing people don’t understand engineering. But as the industry has matured, the marketing has become more and more important as a differentiator, and that’s now driving it. So it seems there are two mindsets at work. I’ve written a lot of articles about how the engineering and the marketing people don’t always connect internally and the problems it can cause.

RC: I agree. It brings us back to your point about consolidation. Sometimes the companies that aren’t able to succeed, it’s not necessarily about whether they can get the finance, or about the technology. It’s because their marketing message isn’t good enough, or they’re not able to get it out to the customer. There are brilliant people in the telecoms industry who can come up with lots and lots of clever technologies.

But to the public and the end user, that probably doesn’t really matter very much. They still come back to this issue of, they want it to do what it needs to do. I still tend to find it strange when companies promote their marketing message around very specific facts and figures on speeds, and upload speeds, and download speeds, or even referring to 5G and 4G. To the person in the street, that doesn’t really matter. It’s a false way of promoting it.

But it’s like everything in technology. Some of the advances are without doubt, very, very clever, and will probably lead to things that really change the way we use technology, and things like that. But to you as a user, the change is small.

It’s all about your perspective of course. Moving to the ExCel is another chapter in the Connected Britain story which echoes the success of the industry as a whole in recent years. A leap of faith, just like the alt-nets, and every other start up in our sector. We wish Rob and his team luck and look forward to a great show in September.

Tickets for Connected Britain are available via this link:
<https://www.terrapinn.com/conference/connected-britain/index.stm>

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