



# NO COMMERCIAL BREAKS

TRENDS TO DISCUSS IN 2026

**Conversations, Insights & What's Ahead for Video Service Providers**

Emily & Jean  
Whitepaw Solutions + CNS

# WELCOME TO THE CONVERSATION

If you've ever felt like the video industry moves at a pace that's hard to keep up with, you're not alone. Between shifting sports rights, streaming fatigue, AI disruption, and the constant evolution of how people consume content, there's a lot to unpack.

That's exactly why we started **No Commercial Breaks**—a place where we could sit down, have honest conversations, and make sense of what's happening in our industry. No scripts. No sales pitches. Just two people who've spent their careers in video services talking about what matters.

This ebook is a collection of the trends, insights, and conversations that have emerged from those discussions. Think of it as the highlights reel—the themes that kept coming up again and again, the questions our guests raised, and the patterns we've noticed working alongside providers like you.

Whether you're a longtime operator navigating disruption or an ISP considering your first video offering, we hope these insights spark some ideas for your own 2026 strategy.

Let's dive in.

— Emily & Jean

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# CHAPTER 1

## Video Isn't Dying. It's Evolving.

Let's address the elephant in the room.

For years, we've heard the same narrative: cable is dead, video is dying, cut the cord and never look back. And yet, here we are in 2026—busier than ever.

"Jean and I laugh about it. We thought cable was dying and here we are, I think, busier than ever. There's definitely an opportunity to get into the space."

— Emily

The truth is more nuanced than the headlines suggest. Yes, traditional cable subscriptions have declined. But video services? They're experiencing a genuine renaissance. The difference is how video is being delivered and who is delivering it.

We've seen renewed energy at every industry event we've attended this year. Operators aren't running away from video—they're getting creative with it. They're testing new approaches, exploring IPTV solutions, and finding ways to make video work for their specific subscriber base.

"Seeing how people are wanting to talk about video, wanting to offer these solutions for their subscribers—I think that part's been exciting for me to see. People were there talking about video and excited about it still."

— Emily

**The 2026 Opportunity:** If you've been sitting on the sidelines, now is the time to reconsider. The providers who are thriving aren't the ones who abandoned video—they're the ones who evolved with it.

## CHAPTER 2

### The Sports Puzzle: Fragmentation & Frustration

If there's one topic that gets everyone talking, it's sports. Not just because we love watching our teams—but because the sports content landscape has become genuinely complicated.

Jean put it perfectly when describing her experience as a Minnesota Gopher hockey fan:

"If you're a Gopher hockey fan, it's like, okay, it's maybe not Friday and Saturday night, could be Thursday night, it could be on Big 10 Network, it could be on the local broadcast station, it could be on the local RSN. I mean, you don't really know."

— Jean

This fragmentation isn't just frustrating for fans—it's creating real challenges for providers. When a subscriber calls asking where to find tonight's game, the answer might be different than it was last week.

Or last month. Or last season.

We spent significant time in 2025 helping operators navigate the MLB rights changes affecting Minnesota Twins coverage. What struck us wasn't just the complexity—it was how the industry came together to solve it.

"What I appreciated during that was just how the industry came together to make sure that those operators that had customers in the affected areas had somewhere to turn to make sure that those subscribers could get access to baseball."

— Emily

The Senate Commerce Committee is now looking at where all this sports content is going. It used to be on two or four channels; now it's scattered across apps and outlets. This scrutiny suggests we're not the only ones noticing the problem.

**What This Means for 2026:** Sports remains the single biggest driver of video subscriptions. Providers who can help subscribers navigate this complexity—through better guides, proactive communication, and flexible packaging—will stand out from the competition.

## CHAPTER 3

### Your Local Advantage Is Real

Here's something we believe deeply: local providers have advantages that national players simply cannot replicate.

Yes, you're competing against companies with massive marketing budgets and coast-to-coast name recognition. But you have something they don't—genuine connection to your community.

"Local ISPs deliver more than just Internet... those ISPs that are competing against the Comcast and other companies that have internet and video are going to lose subscribers if they don't offer video. That's what we're seeing."

— Emily

When we had Ian Phillips on the podcast to talk about local sports broadcasting, the conversation kept coming back to community impact. Local content, local sports, local connection—these aren't just nice-to-haves. They're differentiators.

We've talked with sports broadcaster Justin Kutcher about how much the industry has changed. Despite all the technology shifts, one thing remains constant: people want to feel connected to something bigger than themselves. Sports delivers that. Community delivers that. And local providers are uniquely positioned to deliver both.

"At the end of the day, it's about serving those subscribers and their communities well. I think that was a really good example of that this year."

— Jean

**The 2026 Play:** Don't try to out-Comcast Comcast. Instead, lean into what makes you different. Your customer service, your community presence, your ability to know your subscribers by name—that's your competitive moat.

## CHAPTER 4

### App Fatigue Is Real (And It's an Opportunity)

Here's an interesting paradox: consumers demanded choice and cord-cutting. They got it. And now many of them are exhausted by the result.

You've probably seen the TikToks and Instagram videos—NFL fans tallying up how much they'd need to spend on different apps just to watch their team. What started as liberation from expensive cable bundles has become its own kind of burden.

We call it app fatigue. Too many logins. Too many subscriptions. Too many places to look for content. Streaming was supposed to simplify things, but for many households, it's done the opposite.

This creates a genuine opportunity for providers who can help simplify the experience. When you aggregate content, provide unified search, and offer a single point of contact for support, you're solving a real problem that subscribers face every day.

**The Opportunity:** The pendulum is swinging. After years of fragmentation, consumers are looking for simplification. Providers who can deliver a cohesive experience—bringing apps, live TV, and local content together—will capture subscribers who are tired of juggling ten different services.

## CHAPTER 5

### Why User Experience Can't Be An Afterthought

We had a fascinating conversation with Mick about UX research, and one thing he said stuck with us:

"This is not static. You don't sort of build a UX and then sit back and say that's awesome, I've done that. User expectations are not static and you just got to stay right on top of it."

— Mick, UX Research Partner

Your subscribers are comparing your interface to Netflix, YouTube, and every other streaming service they use. Whether that's fair or not, it's reality. The bar keeps rising, and yesterday's "good enough" becomes tomorrow's friction point.

What we've learned from working with operators is that the feedback loop matters enormously. Surveys that just ask "do you like this?" give you binary data. But when you dig deeper—through follow-up interviews, analytics, and ongoing listening—you start to understand the why behind subscriber behavior.

We've also seen interesting demographic patterns. Traditional cable subscribers interacting with set-top boxes have different expectations than younger subscribers using Fire Sticks or mobile devices. One size doesn't fit all.

"If the ISP wants to take subscribers from Comcast or Charter, then they got to think that those are going to be traditional subscribers. There's a little bit of that element in as well."

— Mick

**For 2026:** Invest in understanding how your subscribers actually use your service. The insights you gain will pay dividends in reduced churn and increased satisfaction.

## CHAPTER 6

### AI: Powerful, Promising, and Worth Being Thoughtful About

We'll be honest—every conference we attend, every trade article we read, AI is everywhere. It's impossible to escape. And like many of you, our initial reaction was to gloss over it and think "that doesn't really apply to me."

But that's not quite right. AI is already reshaping video in ways both obvious and subtle.

"When I think AI, the first word that comes to mind is powerful. What would you say?"

— Emily

"I would say fake. Maybe because I've seen some bad AI... But it's definitely not going away. I think like anything, if you use it correctly, use in moderation—everything in moderation is good."

— Jean

Consider what ESPN is exploring: personalized SportsCenter episodes tailored to your favorite teams. No more sitting through highlights of ten teams you don't care about. That's AI-powered personalization that could genuinely improve the viewing experience.

At the same time, we have real concerns. The data being used. The authenticity of AI-generated content. The impact on creative professionals. These aren't hypothetical worries—they're already playing out.

YouTube—the app, not YouTube TV—consistently ranks as the most-watched streaming platform. Much of that is user-generated content, increasingly created or enhanced with AI tools. What does it mean when computer-generated content costs almost nothing to produce but commands premium prices?

**Our Take:** AI is a tool in the toolbox. Figure out how you're going to use it, stay informed about developments, but don't feel pressured to chase every shiny object. The providers who will win aren't necessarily the first to adopt AI—they're the ones who apply it thoughtfully to solve real subscriber problems.

## CHAPTER 7

### The Power of "Coopetition"

One of the most encouraging trends we've observed is how the industry is coming together. Competitors are becoming collaborators. Partners are stepping up in new ways. There's a recognition that in a disrupted market, going it alone doesn't always make sense.

"They're getting creative. They're doing new things to test the market. They're working together. They're partnering in ways that maybe traditionally they wouldn't have. And I think that's really exciting to see people embrace that coopetition idea."

— Jean

We've seen this firsthand through our partnership with CNS (Cooperative Network Services). The consortium model—where operators pool resources to bring a product to market—isn't new, but it's more relevant than ever. When you're facing disruption, having allies makes a difference.

This industry still feels like a tight-knit family. At conferences like WSTA, ACA/NCTC, and the Independent Show, you run into the same people, share the same challenges, and genuinely want each other to succeed. That's not something you find in every industry.

"Even though we're all competing in some ways, we still really do want each other to succeed. At the end of the day, it's about serving those subscribers and their communities well."

— Jean

**For 2026:** Look for partnership opportunities you might have dismissed before. Whether it's sharing resources with neighboring providers, joining a consortium, or working with consultants who've solved similar challenges, you don't have to figure everything out alone.

## CHAPTER 8

### Practical Wins:

#### Small Things That Make a Big Difference

Not everything needs to be a major strategic initiative. Sometimes the biggest impact comes from thoughtful execution of the basics.

Here are some practical ideas that came up in our conversations:

#### Create a Holiday Watch Guide

During the holiday season, subscribers want to find their favorite Christmas movies. Where's Elf this year? What about Christmas Vacation? Instead of fielding dozens of calls, create a simple guide showing where to find holiday classics across your lineup and streaming apps.

"Put together a holiday watch guide for your customers so they can easily reference it... that's going to help your call centers not get inundated with calls."

— Emily

#### Proactive Bandwidth Communication

When families gather and everyone's streaming on different devices, bandwidth gets stressed. Reach out proactively to help customers optimize their setup—router placement, band selection, and realistic expectations for multi-device households.

#### Celebrate Your Team

Your frontline staff are the ones delivering the customer experience. Especially during busy seasons, small gestures matter—bring in meals, stagger schedules to accommodate family obligations, recognize good work publicly.

"Celebrate the people that are making it happen because they're the ones that are going to bring that service to your customers. Make sure that they feel appreciated because that's really going to make a difference in the customer experience."

— Emily

**The Theme:** Operational excellence isn't glamorous, but it compounds. Every positive interaction, every proactive communication, every supported employee contributes to the reputation that keeps subscribers loyal.

# LOOKING AHEAD

## What We're Watching in 2026

As we head into 2026, here's what's on our radar:

- **Continued sports rights evolution** — The fragmentation isn't slowing down, but new packaging solutions are emerging
- **AI-powered personalization** — Expect more services to offer tailored experiences; the question is how subscribers will respond
- **The aggregation pendulum** — After years of unbundling, look for re-bundling trends as app fatigue drives demand for simplification
- **ISP video adoption** — More broadband-only providers will add video to compete with incumbents
- **MDU opportunities** — Multi-dwelling units represent a growth segment for providers willing to serve them
- **Regulatory attention** — Government scrutiny of sports content distribution may lead to policy changes

"The disruption that we've seen in the video industry over the past few years is going to continue. For us, it's about helping our clients stay ahead of that and be ready for whatever changes come their way."

— Jean

# LET'S KEEP THE CONVERSATION GOING

Thank you for spending some time with these ideas. Whether you read this cover to cover or skipped to the chapters that matter most to you, we hope something here sparked a thought worth exploring.

That's really what **No Commercial Breaks** is about—having the conversations that move our industry forward. We don't have all the answers, but we've found that talking through challenges with people who understand them often reveals solutions that weren't obvious before.

If you're navigating video strategy questions, considering new service offerings, or just want to talk through what you're seeing in your market—we'd love to hear from you.

Because here's what we know for sure: the providers who will thrive in 2026 and beyond are the ones who stay curious, stay adaptable, and stay connected to people who can help them see around corners.

Here's to a great 2026—with no commercial breaks.

— Emily & Jean

## Interested in discussing your video strategy?

Reach out—we'd love to start a conversation.

### About Whitepaw Solutions

At Whitepaw Solutions, we take the headaches out of video service management. Working in partnership with CNS (Cooperative Network Services), we help telecommunications providers, local ISPs, and cable operators navigate the complexity of modern video services.

#### Our services include:

- Video service strategy and consulting
- Operational management for video platforms
- Content and programming guidance
- Marketing and go-to-market support
- Industry navigation and partnership development

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