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December 2020
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REVIEW

The Top 10 Stories of the Year

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THERE'S A SILVER LINING IN THERE SOMEWHERE

In December, we typically romanticize the year gone by and look forward to the 12 months to come. I suppose this year half of that is true.

While many of us would like to forget 2020, the pandemic did create opportunities for partners who focused on high-growth products and services that supported the work-from-home trend. That's not to say there weren't partners who struggled — there certainly were — but many were in a position to step in and help customers who took the brunt of the impact from the coronavirus.

When compiling this year-end top 10, we could have littered it with successes and failures

resulting from [COVID-19](#).

You were certainly interested in the articles

that we posted about it. But we wanted this

list to reflect the most-read stories on Channel

Partners. It's hard to argue

that COVID-19 didn't have the most impact —

and that's reflected here in No. 2 —

but we wanted to make sure you knew which

articles got the most traffic. The coronavirus

wasn't the only watercooler — what's the

watercooler when you're working from home?

— topic of the year.

Our coverage of [Frontier Communications' financial woes](#)

drew the most eyeballs in 2020. Fortunately

there is a light at the end of the tunnel for the

company, which is projected to emerge from

Chapter 11 [early next year](#). Our Edward Gately

followed this issue all year long and writes our

cover story.

With so many CenturyLink — now Lumen —

partners in our audience, a shake-up in leadership

always catches your attention. Lisa Miller

[left her role](#) as president of indirect, wholesale

and SME on June 1. Just last month we learned

Miller landed as president and COO of a master

agent that works closely with her old employer.

As for the look ahead to 2021, we've got it. We

asked channel leaders from RingCentral and

Telarus to not only reflect on the past year, but

to predict the opportunities for partners in the

new year.

We hope this reflection on 2020 spurs some

“oh, yeah, that happened” moments and helps

to get you ready for a successful 2021.

**“The coronavirus wasn't the
only watercooler — what's the
watercooler when you're working
from home? — topic of the year.”**

Craig Galbraith is executive editor of Channel Futures and Channel Partners.

Follow him on Twitter at [@Craig_Galbraith](#).

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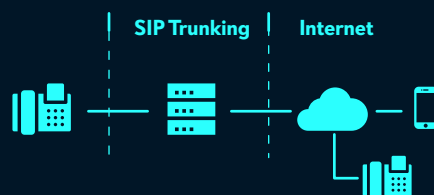
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1 FRONTIER WILL CLOSE THE BOOK ON CHAPTER 11 IN 2021

By Edward Gately

Frontier Communications' Chapter 11 bankruptcy filing didn't come as a surprise in the industry, and anticipation is high as to when it will emerge early next year.

The company's financial struggles and ensuing bankruptcy drama drew high interest from readers.

It was among a number of channel companies that have filed bankruptcy, starting with Windstream in February of last year. It [exited bankruptcy](#) in September. Fusion Connect filed bankruptcy in summer 2019 and [exited last January](#). And Sungard AS filed bankruptcy, then [exited in less than 24 hours](#).

Frontier filed Chapter 11 in April as part of its restructuring support agreement to cut its debt by more than \$10 billion. It filed in the U.S. Bankruptcy Court for the Southern District of New York.

In October, Frontier said its [bankruptcy exit](#) could be coming in early 2021 and 10 states have now approved its restructuring plan. The New York Public Service Commission recently signed off on its plan. Arizona, Georgia, Illinois, Minnesota, Nebraska, Nevada, New York, South Carolina, Utah and Virginia also have given the OK.

Upon emergence, Frontier will have reduced its debt by the \$10 billion amount. Furthermore, it will move forward with enhanced financial flexibility to support continued investment in customer experience and



long-term growth.

"I am pleased with our continued progress in receiving state approvals and appreciate the constructive engagement we have had with regulators across our service territories, including our most recent approval in New York," Mark Nielsen, Frontier's executive vice president and chief legal officer, said in October. "We now await approval in just a few states, including our home state of Connecticut. Through this restructuring process, we are building a stronger financial foundation to provide a better experience for all our customers."

The court confirmed a fourth amended restructuring plan in August.

"Frontier serves a critical function

in providing essential telecommunications services to its customers across the U.S.," said Jonathan Spalter, president and CEO of USTelecom. "We are pleased to see swift and substantial support for Frontier's restructuring, which, upon completion, will enable it to further invest in its services to better meet customers' needs."

In August, the Communications Workers of America (CWA) and The Utility Reform Network (TURN) filed [comments](#) with the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) regarding the bankruptcy. [Concerns](#) were raised about whether the company's proposed reorganization plan is in the public interest.

There were also questions about

whether the reorganized Frontier will invest in improved customer service. That includes service quality commitments and broadband deployment under state and federal programs.

Early Signs

There were early signs that Frontier could be headed to bankruptcy. Frontier CEO Daniel McCarthy stepped down last December, paving the way for a [new chief executive](#). Bernie Han came to Frontier from Dish Network, where he was chief strategy officer. The company praised Han for "turnaround initiatives that increased profitability, enhanced customer experiences and reduced churn rate."

Tackling Frontier's debt would be Han's first priority.

In March, Frontier said it would defer its interest payments while discussing its debt with creditors. This came as the company entered a two-month grace period while working on its financial restructuring. A [Bloomberg report](#) the week before said Frontier was preparing to file bankruptcy with a plan to cut its debt and give control of the company to its creditors.

Still, bankruptcy wasn't a foregone conclusion, because some analysts and experts believed that skipping the interest payments set up a bargaining timetable for the company to negotiate a different outcome. A debt-for-equity swap might be an alternative.

At the same time, Frontier was divesting its Northwest operations, selling to private equity firms.

Then on April 1, Frontier described a restructuring plan that included filing for

Chapter 11 later in the month. An SEC filing said it was getting its creditors' input on the process.

The restructuring plan included transforming Frontier from a legacy services provider to a next-generation broadband service supplier. Fiber-based infrastructure would be at the core of its mission, leaving legacy copper behind.



Frontier's Mark Nielsen

Omdia analyst Brian Washburn said the [COVID-19](#) pandemic might slow the process a bit. But what mattered most was that regardless of legal and financial battles, the business must remain "robust and sustainable," he said.

The Day Arrives

When Frontier finally filed bankruptcy, three in four company bondholders supported the decision.

"With this agreement with our bondholders, we can now focus on executing our strategy to drive operational efficiencies and position our business for long-term growth," Han said at the time.

Frontier would continue to provide service to customers without interruption, he said. And it would work with its business partners as usual throughout the court-supervised process.

Frontier had prepared its master-agent partners for the bankruptcy possibility. Telarus CEO Adam Edwards said he was confident that Frontier will honor partner commissions.

"Frontier has expressed [that] the channel is a priority, and we believe this will play out in much the same

way that the Windstream and Fusion bankruptcies have played out, meaning they'll restructure their debt and will focus aggressively on growing revenue afterward," he said. "The channel is critical to future sales growth and we look forward to playing a role in Frontier's growth post-bankruptcy."

Weeks after Frontier filed Chapter 11, a New York bankruptcy judge approved [nearly \\$38 million in bonuses](#) for the company's executives. The U.S. Trustee's Office objected, but the judge gave the green light after two creditor groups dropped their objections when Frontier agreed to adjust the payment schedule.

As part of its bankruptcy proceedings, Frontier sold its Northwest operations and assets to WaveDivision Capital and Searchlight Capital Partners. The \$1.35 billion deal put



Telarus' Adam Edwards

Ziplay Fiber, a new company, in charge in Washington, Oregon, Idaho and Montana.

This news generated lots of negative comments from readers displeased with Frontier's service and not hopeful about any improvement with Ziplay.

Ziplay said it was spending \$500 million to improve network and service. It has 500,000 customers across the four states and nearly 1,000 employees.

The company is "actively working through a partner program and considering how to best do that." So says CEO Harold Zeitz.



PREDICTION: UCaaS Will Take Center Stage in 2021

BY ZANE LONG

For years I've termed unified communications-as-a-service (UCaaS) the [product of the century](#). Organizations increasingly migrated to cloud communications solutions for greater flexibility in multimodal communication, global scalability and ease of use.

Then in March, being able to communicate with distributed employees and customers became the urgent priority for businesses. Suddenly, UC went from a "nice-to-have" to a "must-have."

2020 proved that people can be productive in a work-from-anywhere environment with the right technology enablement. So what's next? Here are my predictions for the channel in 2021.

1. The Product of the Century Becomes the Product of Necessity

The pandemic has forever changed the workplace, and its longest-lasting effects will drive positive and permanent change in the business world.

Organizations have realized that, in the right environment, [dispersed teams can be productive](#) — sometimes more so than before. But none of this is possible without cloud communications solutions.

UCaaS solutions enable employees to work from anywhere, on the devices of their choice and in any mode they prefer. Organizations can scale and adapt to changing demands, a critical feature in a dynamic world.

Simply put, enabling people to work from anywhere has become a business

imperative. Those businesses that have not implemented robust, scalable communications solutions will struggle to operate effectively in both the pandemic and post-pandemic world.

2. Virtual Events Become Opportunities for 1:1 Purposeful Moments

The shift to a socially distanced business strategy had one big downside: all-virtual channel events. In an industry so accustomed to trade shows, office-based sales blitzes and in-person meetings, everyone will have to think outside the box to bring pizzazz to virtual events. Any virtual get-together in 2021 will require a proactive and deliberate approach to drive excitement and sustain personal business relationships remotely.

[Video fatigue](#) is real, and those who find ways to fight it will be best prepared to succeed. We have to make people want to attend our events, and that starts by providing value. Impactful content is the first step, but the personal aspect should never be lost on us — we are all dealing with building rapport entirely from afar for the first time.

3. The Master Agent Model Goes International

2021 will be the year the master agent model goes international.

I think that will happen for one primary reason: When you free up partners to do what they do best — address specific customer needs — they can provide

tailored solutions faster. By leaving all the technical work of deployment and integration to the vendor and its master agents, partners can focus on what matters most — the customer.

By working together and eliminating conflict, the master agent model presents the [potential for exceptional growth](#) for vendors and their partners.

Looking Ahead

2020 delivered a solemn reminder that the world can change on a dime, and business preparedness is paramount. It amplified the importance of moving to cloud solutions for agility and business continuity.

For those businesses that have been struggling during the pandemic to keep their employees connected and productive, there's nowhere to go but up from here. Communications is at the center of this journey. And channel partners should be poised for a spike in customer queries.

While 2020 is the year that forced businesses to address their technology gaps, 2021 will be the year those gaps get closed. And every single organization will benefit from having a channel partner in their corner acting as their trusted adviser.

Zane Long is the senior vice president of global channel at [RingCentral](#) where he is responsible for the global growth of RingCentral's channel partner program working with key global partners.

2 THE CHANNEL GRAPPLED WITH COVID-19 ON TWO FRONTS, IN TWO ARENAS

By James Anderson

The telecom channel didn't suffer as much as other industries during the COVID-19 crisis, but we've come a long way, nonetheless.

Vendors, master agents and sub-agents fought a multifaceted battle that encompassed technological and financial elements.

On the financial side, some master agents — like [Telarus](#) — advanced commissions to partners to keep them afloat. Some vendors — like [Extreme Networks](#) — gave customers the chance to delay payments by several months. Other companies — such as



iTelecom's Micah Bevitz

[TCG](#) — conducted financial audits to help sub-agents save money.

Providers also enhanced their education to keep partners in the know. One agency rolled out a guide for various state laws pertaining to COVID-19. And some vendors delayed certification deadlines to give partners space to breathe.

And then there was the technology front. [Comcast Business](#) rolled out a [residential connectivity offer](#) to help remote workers segregate their internet activity from that of their family members. And [Bigleaf Networks](#) announced a home SD-WAN solution to optimize internet performance. Meanwhile, the big wireless carriers continue to [build out 5G](#) and thus expand the network edge.

For many firms, the pandemic actu-

alized trends that we've been shouting about for years in the channel: cloud migration, edge computing and digital transformation. Shelter-in-place orders spurred business customers to accept technologies that they've long avoided.

For other partners and customers, the future arrived some time ago. [iTelecom](#), for example, had already equipped many of its partners with desktop-as-a-service. Another example is cloud-based phone systems, which [ATC Consulting](#) had already deployed.

"All our clients had to say was, 'okay, let's work from home now,' and their teams just went home and worked. They could do that because we had already implemented technology solutions that give the end user the same experience in the office, at home or at Starbucks," iTelecom CEO Micah Bevitz told Channel Partners.

Partners also added technologies that we might not consider "advanced" but are now table stakes: USB cameras, headsets and lighting. And other partners have helped their customers take advantage of applications that already existed in their system, such as Microsoft Teams.

"People are now being forced to learn

the functionality that everybody's been touting," Joel Hoffman, director of information technology for TBI, told Channel Partners. "They're going to go, 'Oh, I can't believe it does that. That's fantastic.'"

The deep irony of 2020 for our space is that we were fighting in two arenas. Even as we and our families were struggling to adjust to a quarantine life, we were working to settle our customers into home offices. And our personal experiences migrating to home offices mirrored our customers' experiences.

According to [Nemertes Research](#), the number of employees working out of their homes ticked up from 34% to 72%. And although people will argue about whether or not we'll return to our offices en masse after a vaccine, it seems likely that that the 2021 workforce will look very much like the homebound 2020 workforce.

"Cable operators in the U.S. that I've spoken with are modeling anywhere from 20% to up to 70% of workforces remaining at home, even into next year," said Jeff Heynen, Dell'Oro Group's senior research director for broadband access and home networking.

Channel peeps, we weathered the storm in 2020. Now 2021 beckons, calling us to move from responders to innovators.



TBI's Joel Hoffman



PREDICTION: Out of a Pandemic Comes a New Landscape for the Channel

BY AMY BAILEY

2020 was a crazy year that brought about a lot of changes in our lives. In addition to moving the world to work from home, we had to worry about supplies of toilet paper, milk and Clorox wipes. Trends we saw in 2020 include the shift to cloud communications and the desire for agents to get more training to learn how to swim out of their lanes. 2020 also saw a rise in mergers and acquisitions, and our prediction is this will only expand in 2021.

The pandemic forced businesses to reevaluate their communications infrastructure as they sent people home to work. 2020 was the year businesses abruptly stopped asking “Why should I buy cloud communications?” and started asking “Why should I buy my UCaaS and CCaaS from you?” (agent versus direct). This is especially important now, when IT managers, CIOs and procurement directors are headed to the internet, to the cloud communications providers’ own websites — in many cases, bypassing partners to find solutions. Agents have realized that the master agents who have them covered with engineering talent, tools and software add actual value and make their lives easier. Being able to participate in design and budget conversations, to perform cloud interoper-

ability surveys and, in many cases, run the RFP process is a game-changer for agents.

As the world began to shut down, agents quickly scrambled to determine what tools they could offer their customers to get them to the cloud quickly. As rough as the pandemic was, having options in our portfolio enabled agents to be relevant and offer their customers help in the pandemic. Our business is built upon commis-

“The pandemic forced businesses to reevaluate their communications infrastructure as they sent people home to work.”

sions from other businesses across multiple industries being able to pay their communication and internet bills. We can’t do everything perfectly, but at the end of the day, our revenue and our partners’ revenue hinge on our customers staying in business. When we saw how many industries were suffering, laying off workers and even closing their doors, it raised red flags for us. In calls with agents we told them they needed to expand their portfolios so they were not entirely reliant on network services. But in order to sell these tools effectively, agents realized they

needed to up their education levels. No longer can they survive as “circuit slingers.” Today’s agent needs to be versatile in all areas of the technology stack and needs to consult with their customers to bring the best solutions forward.

Another thing we saw in 2020 was the increase in mergers and acquisitions. Now, more than ever, our industry is attracting the attention of outside money: private equity, venture capital, you name it. The race to scale is on and we would not be surprised to see a lot of M&A activity with both master agents and independent sales agents. Our reoccurring-revenue businesses are growing fast and more people are starting to really understand our unique business model of brokering and not reselling. Though it is impossible to predict who will buy whom, we think you can expect some big moves being made in 2021. We believe it will be the most exciting year in the history of the channel, leaving behind a different landscape of master agents with vastly different value propositions.

Amy Bailey is senior vice president of marketing for [Telarus](#). She currently serves as president of the [Alliance of Channel Women](#) and is a member of the [Channel Partners Business Advisory Board](#).

2020 BRINGS A NEW NAME, NEW LEADERSHIP TO CENTURYLINK

By Edward Gately

This year brought big changes to CenturyLink, including a rebrand to [Lumen Technologies](#) and new channel leadership.

In September, CenturyLink announced the [rebranding](#), saying Lumen reflects how different the company looks from just a few years ago. It said Lumen will help lead enterprises through the challenges and opportunities of the “4th Industrial Revolution.” This is a time when “smart, connective devices are everywhere.”

Garrett Gee is Lumen’s senior vice president of indirect sales.

“We are excited to introduce Lumen to our partner community and bring them our platform for amazing things,” he said. “Our goal is to deliver the critical services that our partners and their customers need from us with a focus on digital delivery. We are moving forward with full attention on ensuring an exceptional customer experience for the solutions that are critical to help businesses harness the power of the 4th Industrial Revolution, including networking, cloud, security, and communication and collaboration.”

Jon Arnold is principal of J Arnold & Associates. He said the rebranding was a “pretty big move, for sure, kind of like Lucent becoming Avaya.”

“No guarantees it will work, but sure, Lumen sounds more modern,

and CenturyLink by its nature kinda sounds old,” he said. “And wasn’t it CenturyTel before? To be fair, the CenturyLink name doesn’t conjure up much, so aside from familiarity, it may not be that radical, especially since it’s more than a name change. It’s also a new positioning as a technology company, so that’s a good reason to make this a clean break with their legacy past.”

In terms of channel leadership, [Lisa Miller](#) left her role as CenturyLink’s president of wholesale, indirect and SME on June 1. She joined CenturyLink in November 2017 and was with Level 3 Com-

munications for more than 11 years. CenturyLink [completed its acquisition](#) of Level 3 that same November.

Miller is now [president and COO](#) of master agent Spearhead Advisors.

[Ed Morche](#), CenturyLink’s president of North America enterprise and public sector, took over leadership duties for the indirect organization. His role now includes leading the indirect sales organization, in addition to North America enterprise and public sector.

In a Q&A with Channel Partners, Morche promised bigger partner deals in the months ahead.

“This new approach will give us a

more direct line of sight to the larger strategic deals that we can drive in tandem,” he said. “Garrett has done an expert job bringing together the partner programs during our integration and driving real transformation. He, along with this team, has deep and wide expertise, and we will continue to leverage that in our strategy. I see tremendous opportunity for our partners with having the enterprise and indirect organizations supported by the same leadership. My focus is ensuring we are all well positioned for mutual growth, success and stability into the future.”

In August, Lumen made more [changes to its channel leadership](#) with the appointments of vice presidents to lead indirect sales in the East and West.

It promoted [Greg Fry](#) to vice president of indirect sales for the East. He’s been with CenturyLink for nearly six years, serving in a variety of leadership roles. Most recently, he was senior executive of sales and business development.

[Craig Patterson](#) was named vice president of indirect sales for the West in an expanded role. He previously was vice president of channel sales.

Lumen also consolidated its indirect inside sales teams and national channel managers under Fry and Patterson’s leadership to deliver an improved partner and customer experience.



Lumen's Garrett Gee



J Arnold & Associates' Jon Arnold

4 Channel Partners Takes a Stand for Diversity & Inclusion

We saw a huge response to [the statement](#) we published supporting the Black Lives Matter movement. We believed it was important for us to take a stand on the issue.

However, we wanted our commitment to not only BLM, but diversity and inclusion, to go far beyond words. We formed the [Allies of the Channel Council](#), inviting channel professionals from a range of colors and ethnicities to offer a diverse set of voices to promote diversity and inclusion in the channel. We pledged that 30% of the speakers at our virtual event in September were people of color — and we made good on that commitment.

Furthermore, we added special diversity and inclusion sections to both [Channel Partners](#) and [Channel Futures](#) to spur discussion around these important topics.



ACC
ALLIES OF THE
CHANNEL COUNCIL

While the death of George Floyd and other high-profile incidents brought this issue to the fore nationally, the timing to address this topic in business — which, for us, meant the channel and the tech industry as a whole — was long overdue.

And we're not done — we are starting to expand the mission of our program to encompass gender diversity, address the lack of professionals from the LGBTQ+ community and to shed more light on the individual struggles of veterans, religious minorities and people with disabilities.

If you want to be involved and help us work for systemic change in the channel, email #ACCouncil chair Kris Blackmon at kris@jsgnow.com. It's going to take the support of a wide swath of people to make the channel in which we work a better place.

5 SD-WAN Is Hot and Our Annual '20 Top' List Names the Hottest

The channel loves a good set of rankings, but few get the attention that our [annual SD-WAN "20 Top" list](#) gets.

For the third year in a row, we polled top analysts, distributors, master agents and members of our [Editorial Advisory Board](#) to identify the compa-

nies that are making a big impact in the channel with SD-WAN solutions. They aren't all the biggest — and they all make the list for different reasons. We've found it necessary to update our list every year as SD-WAN remains one of the hottest and most evolving technol-



Omdia's Brian Washburn

ogies that partners sell.

Case in point are comments from Omdia analyst Brian Washburn, who notes how SD-WAN has moved from a cost-saving play to becoming a key part of complex business transformations.

"Now we're seeing some efforts to bring SD-WAN back to basics through automated ordering and configuration, friendlier self-installation and automated support," he said. "These are ways to bring down the cost of SD-WAN deployment. In that sense, SD-WAN is coming full circle."

Not surprisingly, the pandemic has influenced how companies are adopting SD-WAN. Enterprises now are apt to have SD-WAN gateways supporting large numbers of remote workers with solid performance and reasonable cost.

"There is a much greater demand on vendors as customers hold their feet to the fire," said Bryan Reynolds, director of sales operations at master agent TBI. "Those that rise to the occasion usually are more successful."

From Aryaka to VMware, our [alphabetical list of 20 top SD-WAN suppliers](#) drew vendors and partners alike to our website in droves. We look forward to what our new list brings in spring 2021.

6 Wildix GM Declares War on 'Vampire Vendors'

At the Wildix [UCC Summit](#) in Dallas last February, Robert Cooper, the company's general manager of North America, declared war on what he called "vampire vendors."

So-called vampire vendors are prevailing in the market due to strong branding, Cooper said. He listed RingCentral, Fuze, 8x8 and Vonage as examples of companies that have poured money into marketing and reaped the benefits.

"They do that so they can have a cool image, a cool brand, a cool name, so that end users remember who they are," he said. "They're still vampires. They're not headquartered in Transylvania, but they're in Silicon Valley. And they have offices all across the United States and scattered around the world; in summary, their appeal to customers comes from their large market presence," he said.

According to Cooper, the aforementioned vendors have

products similar to those [Wildix](#) offers, but he said the difference comes down to the vendors' vision for the channel. The "vampire vendors" could ultimately co-opt your customer base,

while Wildix wants to put you and your services at the center of its business model, Cooper said.

Steve Osler, Wildix's CEO, later echoed Cooper's warning in an [April blog](#). "Their real goal is to kill the channel by selling VoIP solutions directly to end users," he wrote. "The Vampire Vendor [is] an enemy that lures you in with the promise of high margins, then drains your business' 'life blood' by stealing your customer base."

Osler explained that vampire vendors made themselves appear larger and stronger than they actually are with ad campaigns and a massive market presence. He advised MSPs that they could prevail by leveraging the Wildix brand — and thus bringing vampire vendors into the daylight.



Wildix's Robert Cooper

7 T-Mobile and Sprint Finally Close Their \$26.5 Billion Merger

Two years after T-Mobile and Sprint [agreed](#) to consolidate, their merger finally came to fruition.

The \$26.5 billion [merger](#), announced on April 29, 2018, had to navigate a several regulatory hurdles before closing on April 1, 2020. That included surviving legal challenges and receiving regulatory approval from public utilities commissions.

On Aug. 2, T-Mobile and Sprint began operating under the T-Mobile brand and the Sprint brand was discontinued. Not too surprisingly, T-Mobile let hundreds of Sprint employees go as of Aug. 13, saying the layoffs were necessary to streamline operations.

In September, T-Mobile unveiled a new channel program. The target demographic for the T-Mobile for Business Partner Program is agents, resellers, MSPs, VARs, cloud partners and solution providers. In unveiling the new program, T-Mobile's channel executives said they were offering "true deal registration" and sought to eliminate channel conflict with T-Mobile direct teams.

"Now that Sprint has joined T-Mobile and we have rebranded retail store operations under the T-Mobile name, we are ready to bring an all-new experience to the channel," Tim Acker, channel chief for T-Mobile for Business told Channel

Partners. "We're not just building a bigger partner program, but a better one — combining the best of both T-Mobile and Sprint legacy channel programs to create a better experience for customers and partners."

"We are using our network for good," said Mike Fitz, vice president of global wireline solutions for T-Mobile for Business. "Whether that's to help connect schools and school districts for virtual classroom learning with Project 10Million or providing free wireless service to first-responder agencies through Connecting Heroes. T-Mobile is expanding our approach to the industry to our partner program as well. And this is just the beginning."

8 Top Gun 51 for 2020 Selected

In July, the sophomore class of [Top Gun 51](#) was announced. Introduced in 2019, Top Gun 51 recognizes premier leaders in the indirect IT and telecom channel. In selecting this year's group, the editors of Channel Partners and Channel Futures considered each candidate in terms of his or her advocacy for the channel, commitment to partners' business success and dedication to earning the channel's trust.

A channel leader possesses integrity, knowledge and confidence. They have the ability to inspire others, commitment and passion. He or she is adept at recognizing the increasing diversity of partner types, revenue models, and partner and customer journeys.

In compiling the Top Gun 51 list, determined each year in tandem with the annual [MSP 501](#), Channel Partners and Channel Futures editors solicited input from those who know channel executives best — distributors, master agents and industry analysts. They helped compile a list that includes

nine repeat winners, plus 42 other individuals representing big names in the channel.

There were also three special award winners. [Laura Padilla](#), head of global business development and channel for [Zoom](#), received the Channel Innovator award for thought leadership



and innovation. The Rising Star award, for an individual who had been in a channel executive role for less than two years, went to [Alyssa Fitzpatrick](#), global leader of partner co-sell at [Microsoft](#).

The Lifetime Achievement Award went to [Frank Rauch](#), head of worldwide channel sales for [Check Point](#).

This year's winners, who serve in a variety of roles across the industry, were recognized in a special program during Channel Partners Virtual: Digital Events for the Modern Channel. Because of the ongoing COVID-19 situation, the Channel Partners Conference & Expo and Channel Partners Evolution were combined into a three-day online event, Sept. 8-10.

10 Microsoft Teams Leads in the Competition Among Meeting Platforms

The uber-competitive battle for unified communications supremacy played out on Channel Partners all year long. Based on the attention a handful of articles on Microsoft Teams got, a whole lot of you are using the software giant's business communications platform.

The inner geek in all of us always likes new features. That's probably why the most popular of the posts was [the introduction of Microsoft Teams "Together Mode."](#) The goal of Together Mode, which simulates attendees in a more realistic context than the typical grid-like gallery, is to help eliminate the status quo and fatigue of online video meetings.

At launch, Together Mode rendered meeting participants in auditoriums or classrooms, with leaders or teachers at a lectern. If your company hasn't deployed this update yet, keep an eye out for it in 2021.

But the Teams craze is about much more than features.

Companies in the channel jumped to forge partnerships and integrate Teams into their own offers. Take Ribbon Communications, for instance, which [launched Ribbon Connect](#), a portfolio of as-a-service offerings that supports Microsoft Teams Direct Routing. RingCentral was on board too, [unveiling RingCentral Cloud PBX for Microsoft Teams](#), which also allows Direct Routing integration. And Poly [debuted a new series of Poly Room Solutions](#) for Microsoft Teams Rooms. They include audio and video tools that deliver meeting experiences for users on Teams.

Of course, it's Zoom that received a ton of attention in 2020 — so much so that the name has become a verb! We posted a number of articles on [the competition](#) among Microsoft, Zoom and a number of other channel players for that lucrative unified communications market.

9 COVID-19 Puts Channel Ecosystem on New Trajectory

At the Wildix UC&C Summit in February, [Forrester's](#) Jay McBain [predicted](#) that direct technology sales would grow faster than indirect in 2020.

McBain, principal analyst of channel partnerships and alliances for the research firm, said the approximate \$2.26 trillion of channel spend accounts for 64% of all technology spend.

"That 64% has been growing for 39 years, and now we're seeing it kind of level off," McBain said.

The meteoric rise of public cloud providers and consistent growth of SaaS providers such as Salesforce does spell revenue for channel partners, but

McBain said a larger share has gone through marketplaces and other direct routes. Sixty-eight percent of buyers said they would rather do their own research.

In a [May 8 blog](#) on the Forrester website, McBain looked at the impact of COVID-19 on channel sales. He expected earnings for the channel to be down, but the amount of the decline would depend on the length and severity of the pandemic.

At the same time, McBain noted that the pandemic had put new emphasis on the channel partner's role as the client's technology adviser. "We are hearing

that the channel's 'brand' is benefiting as an essential service that empathizes with customers and shapes responses around their needs," he wrote.

"Beyond the initial surge in remote work, including communication and collaboration tools, partners can capitalize on moving customers to cloud infrastructure faster, recognize and secure new threat parameters, automate customer workflows and business logic, provide enhanced disaster recovery and redundancy protection, and engage deeper in business consulting to help customers survive and, later, thrive from this crisis."

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