

FHH Telecom Law

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A Pocket Guide to Acronyms

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Does anybody else get confused by the ever-increasing numbers of acronyms for network configurations? I was at a meeting recently where the acronyms were flying faster than next-quarter subscriber projections at a WISP convention. One presentation was so acronym-thick that I found myself gasping for air as a torrent of WANs, P-WLANs, and WMANs sucked up the available oxygen. Even this publication, it must be conceded, sometimes falls prey to the unapologetic use of undefined acronyms. To be sure, speaking in codes known only to a secret fraternity has a certain Skull-and-Bones panache, but always with a lingering suspicion that your listeners merely nod knowingly to avoid looking unhip, but have no idea what you're talking about.

There's also the deeper problem of how to pronounce acronyms normally seen only in print. When I was a kid, for example, I always thought the word "awry" rhymed with "Gene Autry," the cowboy actor; it was a revelation when someone pronounced it correctly as "a-rye." Most people in our industry seem to pronounce "WAN" and its variants with a broad "a" as they would pronounce the regular word "wan." Conversely, people pronounce "LAN" with a flat "a" as in "land." But both pronunciations feel right. Were they reversed, WAN would sound disturbingly like a baby crying and LAN would sound like someone affecting a phony British accent. But with no authoritative source in charge of establishing correct pronunciation, we're all on our own.

Then there's the vexing issue of how to pronounce letters prefixed onto existing acronyms. The biggest problem here is "CLEC." I've heard it pronounced "cee-leck," like "sea change," but also as "cleck," as in "dreck." Perhaps the choice of pronunciation subliminally reflects one's views on competition in the local exchange market. The problem compounds in the field of networks. Someone trying to pronounce both w's in WWAN, for example, sounds like Porky Pig. On the other hand, "double U WAN" sounds clumsy and could easily be confused with UUWAN, which could then be further confounded with UUNet. It's enough to make you want to ululate.

While continuing to ponder the pronunciation problem, we offer the following guide for the acronym-challenged:

WAN	wide area network
WWAN	wireless wide area network
LAN	local area network
WLAN	either a wireless local area network or a wide area (non-local) local area network
LAWN	the weedy area around my house

P-WAN public wide area network
P-WAN private wide area network, never to be confused with its
 opposite, P-WAN
OBI-WAN wide area network in a galaxy far, far away
NO-WAN zen theatrical form where the stage is completely empty;
 the audience sits and silently imagines wireless
 communications
SWAN a large, graceful bird
DAN a guy I know at the gym

Keep this guide handy at all times. People will think you know what they're talking about.