Comcast and Charter are making a streaming box for self-loathing cord-cutters

Enlarge / Xfinity’s Flex box is likely the model for the Xumo Box, a streaming device to be sold at Walmart later this year.
Xfinity/Comcast/Charter

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There are an overwhelming number of choices right now for watching streaming media on your TV. Most TVs have a system built in, often Roku, Google, or Samsung. Standalone boxes from Roku, Apple, Google, and Amazon run the third-party market, and smaller vendors offer remarkably cheap Android-based boxes online and at discount retailers.

But—wait—that’s not all. Now Comcast and Charter, the largest and second-largest cable companies in the US, have their own HDMI-box offering. If you’ve always wanted a box that is stuffed full of “free” ad-stuffed, pseudo-streaming channels, doesn’t have the app stores or mirroring capabilities of the major brands, and helps major cable companies regain market position and recoup revenue lost to cord-cutters like you, say hello to the Xumo Box.

Xumo is the name of Comcast’s free streaming service, purchased by the company in 2020. It’s the kind that looks like a cable channel guide and has an endless loop of pre-selected game shows, reality TV, crime procedurals, and other ready-to-license material akin to Pluto and Freevee. Xumo is a

big part of Flex, the streaming box Comcast's Xfinity service offers to customers who don't want a traditional TV plan.

The Xumo Box is a rebranded Flex, but will be sold in Walmart and other stores in late 2023, as reported by Cord Cutters. It seems likely to be offered to both Comcast and Charter Spectrum customers, given that Charter put $900 million into a joint venture to produce "a variety of branded 4K streaming devices and smart TVs." Cord Cutters suggests the pricing to be "very competitive" with Roku and Fire TV boxes, which can be had for as low as $25 while on sale.

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The existence of a retail box comes shortly after the Xumo venture announced it would provide its free (i.e., ad-supported) streaming channels on TCL smart TVs. Meanwhile, the Xumo venture aims to also provide its own TVs at some point.

From reading reviews of the Flex over the last few years, it has picked up many more services while aggressively pushing its Xumo-centric "Free to you" section. Otherwise, it has reportedly decent voice control and a fairly standard "rows of squares" interface. Each streaming service is added by Xfinity, however, rather than being available in an app store akin to what Apple, Google, Amazon, or Roku provide.

Comcast and Charter aren't likely getting into the streaming hardware business because they're eager to spend hundreds of millions of dollars getting to fifth place. Rather, they've noticed that nearly a third of TVs sold in the U.S. are running Roku's software, that Roku is making its own TVs, and they see a lot of ads, and customer data, left on the table. Comcast and Charter failed to add more Internet customers in mid-2022, a rare result that could have both companies considering revenue diversification.

Time will tell if those needing a new streaming box will turn to a new box backed by companies with historically tricky

brands.

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