

'Service' That's Anything But

A Company's Ineptitude Can Send Loyal Customers Packing

By DON OLDENBURG
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Funny how things you count on don't always add up. But maybe "funny" isn't the right word.

Making the big move from Southern California to the District, the one thing Malinda Worley didn't worry about was satellite TV service at her new Northwest Washington condo. DirecTV is here, and she has been a loyal DirecTV customer for many years.

"How is it possible for a company to have such awful customer service?" she asks.

Okay, make "loyal" past tense. Worley now says her vocabulary doesn't contain a word that adequately describes the customer-service gaffes, technician ineptitude and botched communications she experienced trying to remain a loyal DirecTV customer.

Hey, customer loyalty ain't easy — sometimes because of customer service. Unlike an increasing number of consumers who blow their stacks over customer-service hassles and hijinks (more on that below), Worley tries to remain calm and keep a civil tongue. But that doesn't mean a tempest isn't brewing inside.

When she moved in, Worley's building manager told her how easy connecting to DirecTV would be. Her condo is pre-wired. The rooftop satellite dish serves the entire building. All the DirecTV technician had to do was flip the switch in the router box.

While ordering installation, Worley mentioned that she lived in a "pre-wired, multiple-dwelling unit," as the building manager instructed, and was assured the technician would know exactly what to

do. That's why Worley went into major "huh?" mode when the technician's first words were: "So, where do you want the dish?"

Before she could utter "pre-wired," the technician said, "You can't get a view of the southern sky here, a dish won't work. . . I'll just put down here 'no line of sight' as the reason for no service." And out the door he went.

Worley called DirecTV explaining she needed another appointment. Customer-service reps, one after another, put her on hold and passed her along until one scheduled another house call. "This was not pleasant," Worley says.

And it wasn't pleasant when the technician didn't show up. And when Worley called again and was cut off. And when an installation manager promised to call back and didn't. And when she repeatedly was put on hold, then disconnected. And when she finally reached a supervisor and his first words were: "It says right here that you don't have a line of sight for a dish."

After more wrangling, another clueless technician and another customer-service rep who insisted she needed a dish, Worley gave up. "I tried to get DirecTV. I really tried . . . but what else was I supposed to do?" she asks.

To add insult, weeks later, Worley got a bill from DirecTV — a \$137 "early-cancellation fee" for service she couldn't get connected. "It has got to take extra effort to be this lousy," she says.

Worley's reaction is on the well-behaved side of new Customer Rage Survey findings to be released Thursday. "You have to go back 30 years to find this kind of acrimony between consumers and busi-

nesses," says Scott M. Broetzmann, president of Customer Care Measurement & Consulting and founder of the Customer Care Alliance, an Alexandria consulting firm that collaborated with the W.P. Carey School of Business at Arizona State University in August to conduct the third annual Customer Rage Survey.

Of the 1,012 respondents asked about their most serious consumer problem during the past year, 70 percent "experienced rage," reporting that they were "extremely upset" or "very upset." While rage levels have remained steady over the three surveys, Broetzmann says it is on the rise in certain industries — now at 80 percent in the travel and leisure, financial services and telephone industries. And some elements have inched upward 2 to 4 percentage points — consumers who sought revenge (15 percent), used profanity (13 percent) and raised their voice (33 percent) when dealing with customer services.

- Among the survey's other findings:
- Thirty-three percent said customer service has gotten worse (slightly up). Only 13 percent said the quality of customer service was "excellent."
 - Forty-six percent said they were dissatisfied with the action taken to resolve their consumer problem.
 - Twenty-seven percent spent more than eight hours trying to resolve their most serious problem, and complainants averaged 4.2 contacts with the company. Forty-seven percent said the time they spent complaining wasn't worth it.

"We think many consumers have an informal calculus in their head as to whether they are getting enough back for the time and effort it takes," says Broetzmann, explaining that people who spent an hour or less complaining about their most serious problem were more than two times more satisfied than those who spent more than an hour.

Corporations today spend millions of dollars on designing high-tech, multi-channel, more-access customer-service systems, but, in the end, many customers like Worley end up fuming, he says. "People aren't looking for the moon, they are looking for dignified and respectful conversations with a human being."

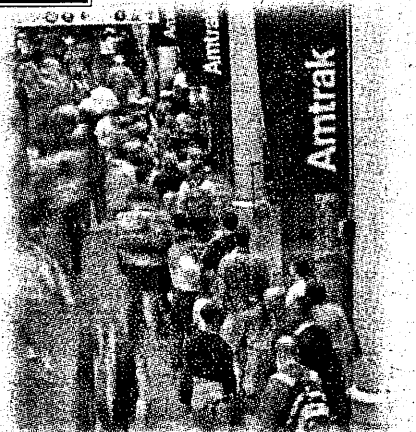
Jade Ekstedt, DirecTV public-relations manager at the El Segundo, Calif., headquarters, says "a series of communications failures aggravated by a gap in our business rules" failed Worley — starting with her order going to DirecTV's Home Service Provider network, which installs dishes at single-family homes and on condominium balconies, instead of the Multiple Dwelling Unit System, which installs pre-wired buildings. "The hook-up would have been completed quickly, and we'd

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Rail Riders

13% of Washington area adults have traveled on an Amtrak train in the past year, according to a Scarborough Research survey. But **90 percent** of local adults, more than 4 million people, hit the road in their car for some reason, not including commuting to work.

—Nancy McKeon



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COURTESY OF GETTY IMAGES

continue to have a satisfied customer," says Ekstedt of what might have been. Instead, she adds, "we went around in circles."

Ekstedt says that typically, the technician recognizes the situation, but "recent growth in our installer group and problems like this send us a clear message that we need to change our procedures. . . . This does not excuse the series of missteps that ensued with our customer-service department and the no-shows and no call-backs on the installation company's part."

After all is said and not done, there's still that \$137 early-cancellation fee. Apologizing to Worley, Ekstedt says DirecTV removed the charge and is "embarrassed and extremely unhappy about how this customer was handled."

Worley says she's now a loyal Comcast cable TV customer.

Got questions or comments? A consumer complaint? A helpful tip? E-mail details to

consumer@washpost.com or write to Don Oldenburg, The Washington Post, 1150 15th St. NW, Washington, D.C. 20071. Because of the volume of mail, personal replies are not always possible.

Measuring Customer Rage

For more information about the National Customer Rage Survey and other studies by Customer Care Measurement & Consulting, visit <http://www.customercaremc.com>.

DirecTV's customer-care Web site is <http://www.directv.com/DTVAPP/customercare/Landing.jsp>. Its toll-free phone number for existing service is 800-494-4388; for new service, 888-238-7177.