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Commentary

Phone Rage

David A. Andelman, 11.02.05, 6:00 PM ET


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NEW YORK - Somehow, through the years, I've managed to accumulate a virtually bottomless reservoir of consumer rage.

I'm not talking about the rude shopkeeper in Paris who makes snide remarks about Americans behind my back, not realizing I speak impeccable French. I mean full-blown, gasket-popping, veins-stand-out-on-the-forehead, melting-the-telephone-line rage.

Now along comes the Customer Care Alliance, which in conjunction with the W.P. Carey School of Business at Arizona State University, has actually managed to document the fact that *I am not alone*. At least 70% of those surveyed in a U.S. poll "experienced rage" in trying to get some sort of customer complaint resolved.

One recent report describing their survey gives some examples. One deals with **DirectTV** (nyse: [DTV](#) - [news](#) - [people](#)). Oh boy, though, can I top their DirectTV story.

Mine stemmed from when we moved into a remote community in northeastern Pennsylvania where, believe it or not, cable TV had not yet penetrated. It was DirectTV or rabbit ears with three snowy channels from Allentown. I sprang for the \$1,500 or so to buy the whole lash-up--antenna on the roof, three boxes for our three TVs--and a tech came down and hooked it all up.

It worked fine, until the first cloudy day. Well, OK, that's a trifle exaggerated. Until the first big storm. Suddenly, nothing but snow and a little note that the box was trying to access the satellite some hundreds of miles beyond the thick layer of wet that lay between me and it. So I missed the evening news and the entire prime time lineup before the weather cleared and my picture came back. I lost track of the number of times that all happened.

But there was a final straw, and that's when I blew a gasket at DirectTV, right before I canceled it and moved to cable (which had since arrived in our hamlet). Another storm seemed to have knocked the antenna out of alignment. They'd come and fix it they said, for a \$75 service call. Service call--\$75?! "Well, after all, you own the equipment." I

didn't want to own the equipment. *You made me*. All I wanted was to pay a monthly fee for the service, which is what I now do with the cable folks who will come whenever I call.

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I never spent very much time with the DirectTV people. They answered their phone quite promptly--though they may not have realized they were about to have their heads bitten off down to their shoulders.

But 27% of the respondents to the Customer Rage Survey said they spent more than eight hours, in the course of four calls, to get their problem resolved. Some 47% said the time they spent complaining wasn't worth it anyway.

"A lot of the reason for this is that businesses are focusing on things that are more meaningful to them than to their customers," says Scott Broetzmann, president of Customer Care Management & Consulting and founder of the Customer Care Alliance. "Trying to find a [service] agent is like trying to find Waldo. They're spending millions of dollars setting up a phone system to make it difficult to hold a conversation."

Not only difficult--sometimes all but impossible. Over the past week, I've been calling **Verizon Communications** (nyse: [VZ](#) - [news](#) - [people](#)) to complain that my high-speed DSL connection has slowed below the speed of the dial-up that I had about ten years ago. Each time, after spending a couple of minutes punching in "1" for English, "5" for DSL, "4" for technical support, "3" for Macintosh--well you get the idea--I got a recording that says in such a soothing voice, "Due to the high volume of calls, there may be a delay in responding. The expected wait time is more than 30 minutes." I've broken at least three handsets over the years slamming my phone down on messages like that.

So it came as little surprise that complaints about phone service (land-line and cellular) were the third most frequent, following closely on retailing, then automobiles (sales and service). Cable and satellite TV were further down--No. 9--a bit of a disappointment from one who has suffered through DirecTV, Blue Ridge Cable and **Time Warner's** (nyse: [TWX](#) - [news](#) - [people](#)) Time Warner Cable all in a matter of weeks.

Some 55% of all the problems had to do with "unsatisfactory performance/quality" or "unsatisfactory service." What's more surprising is that there are 20 more complaint categories ranging from "deceptive advertising" to "product harmful to environment."

Companies had better work hard on "unsatisfactory service" since this was the top complaint for computers, financial services, telephone and travel and leisure, and was a close second in retailing--after product quality, of course. It would seem that the phone company has the most to work on. The highest percentage of those who experienced "rage" in their relations with a company--90%--experienced that emotion with the telephone folks.

And to show companies how important all this is--more than half of those who said they were enraged pledged they'd never do business with this company again.

What really astonished me, though, was that 2% of those surveyed actually had "no rage at all" from their customer service experience. No doubt these people either had the temperament to defuse a nuclear bomb or worked on a phone bank themselves.

David A. Andelman is actually quite meek at the office.

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