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# Customer Runaround Demands a Revolt

By Howard Kurtz

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*Your call is important to us. . . .*

Is anyone else getting mad about what is laughingly called customer service these days?

I don't just mean annoyed, impatient or miffed. I mean eye-poppingly exasperated at the utter disdain with which companies now treat customers who are trying to straighten out erroneous bills or make defective products work.

How many hours of our lives are we supposed to spend sitting on hold or being shuttled from one unhelpful rep to another? I know corporations need to save money in this era of global competition, but some academic study will surely find this institutionalized runaround is costing us billions in lost productivity -- not to mention medical bills for ulcer treatment.

The latest twist is "help" lines that won't even let you hang on. *We are experiencing unusually heavy call volume at this time. Please try your call later.* The signal is the same from corporate Web sites that make it difficult to find a phone number, or voice-mail menus that bury any option that might summon an actual human being. Message: Go away. We don't want to deal with you.

A while back I canceled a 30-day trial on a cell phone that had terrible reception and was told I had to wait for the company to send a mailing label so I could return the phone and get the promised refund. The label never came. I called back and was again told the label would be sent out. I'm still waiting. This came after I had called another cell phone company to cancel a contract that had expired after two years. The firm kept billing me. When I called to complain, an agent said there was no record of the cancellation call.

Such corporate amnesia has become common. When I had to cancel a hotel reservation because I couldn't make the trip, I was told a refund would be no problem. When I called again to ask about the refund, there was supposedly no record of my earlier call.

When I tried getting Internet service from cable company A and the thing never seemed to work, the wait times for tech support grew longer and longer until I once found myself holding on for an hour and a half. (Hey, I was desperate.) I canceled -- spending months disputing a charge for not returning the cable box, which I had personally waited in line to return -- and switched to cable company B, where I also endured long wait times until the technical glitches were finally worked out.

And don't even get me started on online banking. It works great, until it doesn't -- and when my bank

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admitted having failed to send out the monthly check for one bill and I asked for help in reversing the late fee, I was told I could not get a record showing it was the bank's screw-up. I didn't care that much about the \$15 fee, I just felt on principle that I shouldn't be stuck with it.

I've also had my share of calls routed to India, which wouldn't be so bad if those struggling with English could be of more help.

How did we get to this point? Why are there Web sites (such as Planet Feedback) filled with tales of lousy treatment? And why can't anything be done? If a retail store provided such poor service, people would simply stop shopping there. But when it comes to phones, cable, computers, banks and health insurance -- not to mention just buying stuff online -- most of us have come to accept being treated like dirt.

A Purdue University researcher told USA Today that 80 percent of American companies fail to do a decent job with customer service. And in a survey by the Virginia-based Customer Care Alliance, nearly one in three customers said they had raised their voices at customer service reps in the previous year, and nearly one in 10 said they had employed Dick Cheney-like curse words.

Computer tech support may be the most frustrating. "When we pick up the phone we're lying," Kyle Killen wrote in Salon.com of his stint as a technical rep. The agents were so arduously trained to get callers off the phone within 12 minutes that they often repeated their mantra -- "We don't support that" -- or became "punters," switching customers to someone else who also couldn't help. "We were there to take your calls, not solve your problems," he writes.

It's time for the masses to rebel, to file complaints, to reject the culture of non-help that too many companies embrace. Our call is *not* important to them. And for that infuriating attitude, they should pay a price.

*Howard Kurtz is a Washington Post reporter.*

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