

IT Customer Service

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A lot of people complain about the arrogance of IT people and our general failure to understand either the customer or the business. So what happens when IT is the business? or, at least, where IT has a clear role on the customer service delivery side?

Well it depends first on the extent to which the company feels competitive pressure and second on who's in charge in IT.

The longer you make the customer wait, the more likely it is that people requiring simple answers drop off.

Canada is a land of monopolies with almost everything ultimately owned by the same people and lots of heavily protected, and deeply entrenched, monopolies frozen in place by inertia and interlocking government and financial processes.

Bell Canada, for example, dominates consumer telecommunications services in central Canada - and really should have a single upward waving finger as its corporate logo. No matter what you want from them, there's a procedure, an extra charge, weeks of delay, and at least an hour of hold time before they allow you to place a service order.

Telus, formerly Alberta Government Telephones, has a similar functional monopoly in Alberta and B.C. Everything is now web or IVR based - and their web site materials, although I believe served from Sun gear, pretty much require you to have I.E.

Indeed "require" in the legal sense of judicial compulsion is one of their favourite words - for example they "require" you to give them your legal land description before they'll provide local service.

On the other hand their website, although heavy handed in terms of customer imposition and general arrogance, doesn't provide simple factual information like what a local line costs. The answer turns out to be \$25.16 per month - oh, plus \$4.95 to enrol in a long distance plan, another \$5.00 for the first 100 minutes of long distance service, \$4.95 for caller ID, and \$7.95 for call forwarding; i.e. about \$48.01 per month for basic service.

In other circumstances that's called "monopoly rent," but this is a monopoly rant so I need to mention that the information-free nature of their website with respect to basics like pricing forces you onto their IVR system. It's wonderful, the computer delivered voice even manages to sound irritated; as if, you know, the CPU had been in sleep mode when you dared interrupt.

Well thank God for speaker phones: after several experiments with this I can confirm that the fastest way to get past it is simply to dial the number, put your phone on speaker, and go for coffee - it takes a long time before the IVR gives up and puts the call on the hold queue for a human operator, but it's a faster, and less frustrating bet than trying to work through the menus.

What's going on here in terms of customer service is ultimately a consequence of putting data processing people in charge of call center development - because you get what you measure, and their primary measure is utilisation.

In reality it's both cheaper overall and more efficient for a company like Telus to answer calls quickly and effectively, than it is to put real and potential customers on hold for long periods of time and then make them call back to correct the errors and misunderstandings induced by hold rage.

However, queueing drives utilisation because the longer you make the customer wait, the more likely it is that people requiring simple answers drop off, and the higher the call center's overall utilisation, measured

as (operator minutes used) divided by (operator minutes available), gets. Equally importantly, queue durations provide an almost ideal capacity planning tool because the drop rate can be manipulated -and capacity planning is, of course, data processing's primary utilisation management tool.

In other words, next time some company that doesn't have effective competition and is likely to have had a strong data processing heritage has you on hold, you should spare a thought or two for the people whose rebellion against the excesses of mainframe data processing brought us the PC revolution; and then chuckle wryly at the irony of what we're seeing now, as the PC client-server architecture turns into the mainframe one from the seventies.

On the positive side, Telus has competition; more or less. A long time ago, from about 89 through 98, I was a happy Cantel mobile phone customer with a three watt Motorola S2898A transmitter mounted in the back of the car, an external antenna, and a standard size handset mounted on the hump between the rear seats - where I can easily reach it from the driver's seat but it's otherwise nicely out of the way. Then Cantel got bought up by somebody bigger and became unable to bill its customers correctly: my (contractually fixed) bills started fluctuating by something like 50% month to month, and I eventually caved -cancelling the service simply because it was taking longer each month to get the bills corrected.

Since then what's left of Cantel has become part of Rogers, a cable company operating out of Toronto that at some point also bought the Sprint name and service for Canada. Rogers offers competitive home telephone service in the Telus service area - and their website says it costs \$29.95 per month for basic service.

But I still have my antique Cantel phone in the car, and I'd like to use it - mainly because it has a full size handset with buttons I can hit with fingers instead of needing a ball point pen tip and no *&^&% "features" that don't belong on a phone. So I used the "contact us" option on the webpage offering answers by email to ask whether my old phone could be used or a modern equivalent found.

And the response?

Thank you for taking the time to write to us, we appreciate your use of online customer service.

In your recent email, you have informed us that you are interested in our services.

To assist with your inquiry, here is where you can confirm eligibility, find detailed information, current pricing, and secure online sign-up forms for our products and services:

For Rogers Home Phone Service, please visit:
http://www.rogerstelecom.ca/products/index_homeconn.php3 .

Cool, except that's the web page with the "Contact us" button I started from.

And their IVR? Don't know yet, I dialed it before starting to draft this, and I'm still on hold for the next available customer service agent - but hey, I know my call is important to them because they've told me several times now, and besides they're monitoring the call in order to "maintain excellence in customer service" -a phrasing that tells me, I think, why I'm still on hold.

(A late note: the Rogers website offers the home phone service and related bundles for my new postal code in Lethbridge, but Roger's doesn't actually offer the service there - so I'm probably going to be paying Telus and giving them my legal land description whether they have any legal power to "require" that information from me or not.)

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