

TELECOMMUNICATIONS AND CUSTOMER SERVICE Where Are We?

Executive summary
June 2018

Who hasn't heard the famous phrase "Your call is important to us" while desperately trying to reach a telecommunications service provider's customer service? The quality and effectiveness of customer service are more important than ever, given that telecommunications products and services are now at the heart of daily life.

Our research was intended to assess the situation in Canada regarding customer service and to find, where necessary, viable solutions to identifiable problems, notably by examining the legislative frameworks of other jurisdictions.

Telecommunications customer service, which involves multiple means of and reasons for contacts between consumers and providers, can be described in terms of six main components:

- Information: handling requests for information and explaining services, products, invoices, etc.
- Sales and building customer loyalty: taking orders, changing bundles, promoting products and services, etc.
- Administrative: customer record creation, updating, closure, etc.
- Technical: installation, repair, adjustment, etc.
- Problem-solving: technical problems, managing notices and disconnections, etc.
- Complaint resolution

The consumer is thus likely to contact customer service for the entire duration of his relationship with the provider: the first contacts prior to subscription; requests for answers to any questions; resolution of any technical or administrative problems; closure of the file and disconnection. So it's not surprising that consumers rely on customer service, with mixed results at times. Companies will probably all claim they give the consumer priority in all their decisions or activities, but what measures are actually adopted in that vein, and how are they implemented in customer service?

By means of a Canada-wide survey, we tried to determine how consumers evaluated their relations with their telecommunications providers' customer service, and to identify its most problematic aspects. With a level of satisfaction of around 80% with the providers' customer service, we might think there's no problem with it. But the respondents' overall level of satisfaction tends to decrease when a customer service call aims at solving a problem rather than simply requesting information. Respondents to our survey ranked customer service among

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their providers' poorer aspects, well below service quality or reliability but, not surprisingly, above prices.

At the CCTS, complaints about customer service tripled in the last four years and made up almost one-third of all complaints the agency received outside its mandate. The agency's statistics suggest that providers' resolution of problems experienced by customers – a key aspect of customer service – shows many weaknesses and requires more work on the providers' part. This corresponds to the relatively low consumer satisfaction level when a problem is raised with a provider. Moreover, the CCTS has very low notoriety, so very few complaints unresolved or poorly resolved by customer service are actually brought before the agency.

Indeed, the dissatisfaction or the problems experienced by many consumers have been found by numerous foreign jurisdictions and institutions to be serious enough for them to intervene, tighten the rules and impose certain standards, thus regulating several customer service aspects that have also been criticized in Canada, and even ordering at times the payment of penalties to consumers in cases of default.

Our recommendations are for the CRTC to regulate the service providers' customer service policies, so that customers know what to expect when contacting customer service and are treated adequately. We recommend that the CRTC establish certain minimal standards and require accountability for all standardized aspects and for complaint handling. We also recommend that the CCTS handle consumer complaints about providers' failures regarding their customer service policies.

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