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## Consumers Frustrated With Static on the Service Line

Communications Companies Rankle Customers

By Yuki Noguchi  
Washington Post Staff Writer.  
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Since last fall, Doris Margolis has been begging Comcast Corp. to fix a problem with the cable line running into her Silver Spring home. Now, roughly nine months later, service is restored but an unsightly black wire dangles like a giant necklace through her front yard.

"It's a wonder a child or someone hasn't strangled themselves on it," Margolis said of the cable, which hangs about five feet off the ground. "I've lost count of the times I've called the local office," trying to get them to come out and bury it, she said.

Even as technology races to new heights in the communications industry, the mundane matter of customer service keeps dragging consumers back to earth. Such companies now rate near or at the bottom in some customer satisfaction surveys, even as the government moves to loosen oversight and deregulate the industry.

Technologies and promotional deals are changing faster than billing, technical or administrative systems can accommodate, customer service experts say, and in a growing industry, the focus tends to be on gaining new customers rather than satisfying old ones. Complaints range from the everyday -- long waits on tech support calls or in lines at cell phone stores -- to more extreme cases such as Margolis's and others.

"They just don't have much sense of how to keep customers satisfied," said Claes Fornell, a professor at the University of Michigan. "When consumers have no choice, [and] when they can't penalize companies for bad service, there's no incentive for the supplier to improve service. When there is competition and consumer choice, it does get better."

But a series of mergers and regulatory decisions in the industry could worsen problems by concentrating power in the hands of fewer, bigger companies, consumer advocates say. Two recent decisions -- one last week by the Federal Communications Commission and another by the Supreme Court in June -- could reduce competition because phone and cable companies will no longer be required to lease their lines to rival Internet service providers.

"They're not really afraid of losing your business. You have nowhere else to go," Gene Kimmelman, director of Consumers Union, said of the industry's big players. "Mergers are definitely going to make it worse, reducing the competitive threat even more."

Cable and wireless operators in particular ranked the lowest in a customer-satisfaction survey during the first quarter of this year -- even lower than the much-maligned airline

industry, according to the American Consumer Satisfaction Index. Local and long-distance service providers ranked slightly higher -- 70 points on a scale of 100, compared with 63 for wireless carriers and 61 for cable and satellite companies -- although the satisfaction rate had declined 10 points in the past decade, according to the survey, which is an independent measurement jointly taken by the University of Michigan and the American Society for Quality.

In comparison, airlines received an average 66-point mark, while express-delivery services such as FedEx Corp., United Parcel Service Inc. and others got an 81-point score.

"Telephone companies have a long history of not getting it," said Robert E. Spekman, a professor at the University of Virginia's business school. "Nobody takes responsibility for end-to-end service," he said, especially in giant companies that offer a broad selection of services across a huge geographic area. Those companies have introduced an array of high-speed Internet, television and wireless applications that are complex to set up and often are not well-coordinated within each organization, Spekman said.

Dealing with his wireless phone provider was especially troubling for Greg Nudd.

In May, Nudd's wife died suddenly, leaving Nudd alone to care for his children. When he called Sprint Corp. several days later to cancel his wife's cell phone service, the company cut off service to his phone as well, rendering him inaccessible to family, the funeral home, his kids' teachers and grief counselors.

Nudd called four or five times to try to reactivate his service, but was told he lacked legal authority to do so.

"Typically, people are sympathetic and ask, 'what can I do to help you,'" said Nudd, an environmental engineer in Austin. But in this case, a customer service agent based in Bangalore, India, told him he must call another number. Eventually, he gave up and signed up for service with another carrier, but as of last week, he received bills for his and his late wife's cell phone for the previous two months.

Sprint, which last week received regulatory approval to merge with Reston-based Nextel Communications Inc., said it deals with customers' situations on a case-by-case basis. It has policies to protect customers from fraudulent activities on a closed account, spokeswoman Lisa Malloy said, and customers can request to talk to a supervisor if they are unhappy with the solution a representative provides.

Dogged persistence paid off partially for attorney David Hutner, a seasoned dialer of the Verizon Communications Inc. customer-service line. He tried to resolve problems with his high-speed Internet service on at least eight occasions in the past two years. After spending dozens of hours yelling on the phone, he was given the names, direct phone

numbers and even cell phone numbers for people who work in the "Resolution Group" in Canada, he said.

"When I was dealing with the Resolution Group, I could feel my blood pressure going down. The real reason I felt better was because I was talking to a real person," said Hutner, a Chevy Chase resident of who ultimately canceled his DSL service for a cable connection.

Customer service has had to keep pace with more sophisticated technologies, and Verizon has added more customer representatives with each new product, said Eric Rabe, a spokesman for the phone giant. Customer service is one of the costliest operations in the business, and even if a high percentage of problems get resolved, there are still thousands of unhappy customers, he said. "It's the hardest thing we have to do."

Jaye Gamble, a Comcast senior vice president, said internal surveys show that more than 95 percent of appointments made with customers are met and problems are resolved. Gamble said the company faces competition, and that forces it to try to improve its reputation with customers. "This has been a constant since I've been in the telecommunications industry -- you have to provide good customer service. If you don't, somebody else will," he said.

But Potomac resident Lotte Hall said she seems to keep falling through the cracks.

Since June 22, Hall has tried to resolve an ongoing problem with her Comcast service, but after several no-shows and a visit from a workman who was not able to resolve it, she feels trapped. "They keep saying they passed it on to the upper echelons," she said, yet nothing has happened.