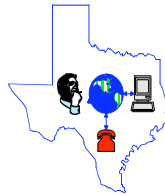


**B AND C CONSULTING
2712 MEADOWVIEW DRIVE
COLLEYVILLE, TEXAS 76034
PHONE 817-267-8086 FAX 817-545-9211, c.holliday@ieee.org
"TELECOM TECHNOLOGY & MARKET PLANNING:
FIBER OPTIC NETWORK PLANNING AND ENGINEERING"**



What's Really Wrong at SBC – Part II Or What Ever Happened to Customer Service?

A little over a year ago I wrote a short piece with the title, “What’s Really Wrong at SBC?” That article (see www.igigroup.com – Archived Papers) was primarily about the contribution that the conversion to high-speed access lines (both cable modems and xDSL) made to the loss of primary lines at SBC. It also considered the contribution the poor competitive position of SBC in relation to the cable companies made to SBC’s disappointing financial performance. While I still believe that analysis is an accurate depiction of why SBC continues to lose primary lines and net income, I have found a much more fundamental problem – poor service!

Service quality has long been the trump card that the traditional telcos are supposed to hold over the cable companies and others who may want to enter “their” markets. However, my recent experience “up close and personal” with SBC suggests that they have lost that card.

Come listen to my tale of woe. All I wanted was another line installed for my new wife’s fax machine. (These days new wives require new fax lines.) It turned into a multi-week disaster.

The Order – This was, perhaps, the most pleasant part of the whole ordeal. The CSR (customer service representative – at least that is what we used to call them) was very competent, professional, and friendly. I ordered a new line for my home and a jack installation for that line in my wife’s office. (In the parlance of the business, this was an “n” order for the new line and a “c” order for the jack – c for change, even though I

didn't have the line before.) The CSA indicated that she would enter the orders and that they would be in contact with me to schedule the installation.

Flub One – missed “Appointment” – We had not heard from SBC regarding an installation date, but about three days later found a tag on the front door saying that I had missed my “appointment.” The instructions were for me to call in to the Business Office for a “new” appointment. I was soon to know this number and its interminable voice response system by heart. I did as directed and re-scheduled the installation for a few days hence.

Flub Two – A line but no jack – The big day came when we were to get a new fax line so I could set up my wife's office. The telephone man came as scheduled, and began immediately to perform the installation. While he was working outside running the new temporary drop line across my back yard, I told him I would show him where the jack went when he was ready. He immediately stopped and looked at his papers. He indicated that he didn't have an order for the jack, and he didn't have time to add it to the order and do it while he was there. I got a new line (with the wire temporarily across my back yard), but no jack so I couldn't use the line. What had happened was that SBC had failed to associate my two orders (the 'n' order and the 'c' order). This lack of order association problem would continue to haunt this epic.

The technician indicated that he would enter a new order for me and that I should call the Business Office (and that great voice response system) to get a new schedule. I did so and the new schedule was for a few days hence between 8 and 12 AM.

Burying the Drop – Look before you dig – Before the installer left, I asked him when they would mark my back yard (i.e., locate the other buried services so that none of them were broken while placing my new drop – a program that the telcos have supported for decades) and bury the wire that was temporarily laying across my back yard. He indicated that I would have to call to get the yard marked, and that SBC's contractor would be by to bury my drop. The obvious question was how the two would be coordinated. (The yard had to be marked first, and then the man burying had to come and do his work.) The obvious answer was that they would not be coordinated – and they were not.

As one may expect, the man to bury the drop wire came before the yard was marked. Therefore, I could not allow the drop to be buried. After the man marked the yard, I had to call the burying crew to come back. (At least I didn't have to go through the voice response hell to get to them!)

Flub Three – I was there but SBC was not – The day for my jack installation was just two days before we were to go out of town for Christmas. (The ‘yard marker’ had come this same day.) I had many things to do, but I thought the jack installation would only take an hour, and I would still have plenty of time to do my things that afternoon – foolish me.

I waited (not really very patiently) for the installer to come. I waited and waited and waited.

By 11:45 AM, I was at my wits end because I had hours of things to take care of for our trip. So I called the Business Office again (is anybody counting?) The CSA I got this time was very different from the first one. It was a man with a brusque way of talking that was somewhat offensive to start with. I explained my problem to him and asked if he could tell me the status of my installation. He responded by recounting his experiences riding with installers, and advising me that the one scheduled to do my work had just been delayed. The installer would be there.

I continued waiting, doing a slow burn. By 3:00 PM, I was ready to forget the whole thing. I called the Business Office again. (The voice response system really was welcome about this time!) I got one of the CSAs who cares. He really did check on the status of my order (unlike the last one). After checking, he came back on the line and apologized profoundly. My order had been written, but never released! No one was coming! No one had ever been scheduled to come! This CSA was very helpful. He re-scheduled the installation for after we got back from our trip, and offered to do that work free because of the trouble I had incurred.

Flub Four – I just thought I had another working Fax line – For some reason I used my old fax line (I occasionally use it for voice calls) before I left to try to get some of my errands run. There was a loud hum on the line! The cable markers had used it to mark the locations of the buried telephone lines and had some how not put it back correctly. Not only did I fail to get my new line installed as promised, but also one of my other two lines was damaged!

I called to report this new problem on the Repair Service number. I got a different, but still extremely annoying voice mail system. After calling the repair line and answering several questions about the nature of my trouble, I was asked if I was calling to report trouble on a line!

Anyway, I finally got to a person, and explained the problem. After asking some of the same questions again (the voice response system helps productivity – how?), the repair clerk asked if I was calling on the line in trouble. I told her that I was so that she could hear the problem (which she indicated she had). I was still able to use the line; it just had this annoying hum. She promptly told me that she could not take the report because I was calling on the line in trouble. I couldn't believe it, so I carefully explained, again, that SBC had caused the trouble, and it was very clear to hear on this line. No matter – rules are rules. I was told that if I wanted to report the problem for SBC to fix it, I would have to go to another phone line. I had another line immediately available to me, but many would not have had. Others would have had to go out to a store or somewhere to report this trouble, before SBC would do anything about it – even though SBC had caused the trouble!

Off on vacation – no new line and an old one broken – Therefore, I called (on another line) and reported the problem. The technician was scheduled to come out the next day – the day we were leaving. We took off for our Christmas vacation with the back yard gate unlocked so they could get in to repair the damaged line, and with a promise that SBC would come to install my jack the day after we got back. I wondered how SBC would perform on these two promises. Given the track record to date, I was surprised that the house was still there when we returned!

Batting .500 is good – in baseball – When we returned, one of the first things I did was to check the old fax line to see if it was fixed – it was – surprise, surprise! The next day, the repairman showed up as promised, installed my jack, and connected the new line. I thought I was going to have to give SBC a star rating, but they came through as expected – in spades.

A line, a jack, - you wanted dial tone too? – The technician was very efficient in installing the jack where I wanted it, and connecting the line outside, however, when I asked if it was working, he said there was some kind of problem on the line. After testing several places outside, he told me my cable pair (my connection back to the telephone company office) was bad, and no good ones were available.

Everything was in, but nothing was working. He told me that he was going to refer the problem to the SBC cable department, and that they would probably fix it that day. In about two hours another SBC technician appeared. I related the problem and repeated what the first repairman had told me. He tested a couple of places outside, and disappeared, without telling me anything. I tried my new line, but it still had no dial tone. After a while, I called the Repair Office voice response system (I was getting to know it about as well as the Business office and I hadn't even been able to use my new line yet!)

You want it to work – OK but you will pay for it! – When I finally got through to Repair Service, I explained the problem to the clerk, and she looked at some records, and informed that since I didn't have a contract for SBC to maintain my house wiring, it would cost me an hourly fee for SBC to come out and fix my problem! I was astounded – but instead of losing my cool, I politely asked to speak to a supervisor. Amazingly enough, after going through the same thing with the supervisor, I got the same answer! If I wanted it fixed (never mind that it had never worked), I would have to pay SBC to come out and fix it.

It occurred to me that the original problem of the failure of SBC to associate the two orders (install the new line and install the jack) was still plaguing me. So I asked the supervisor (a Ms Price, who was very nice) if she was looking at both orders. Sure enough, she was only looking at the order for the new line. (As these things go now, unless I had ordered a jack to be installed, the inside work was my problem.) When she pulled the order for the jack, and realized that they had complete responsibility for the service, she immediately dispatched a repairman,

Finally, service – only two weeks later – This ended my confrontation with SBC. It had taken two weeks to complete an installation that should have taken two days. It had required six trips by different technicians (not counting the two trips by the three-man burying crew or the yard markers) to my home, when one could have easily done the job in a couple of hours. I had called the Business Office and Repair Service numerous times and I had spent at least three full days of my time on the project.

SBC is wondering why they are losing lines to competitors? They wonder why their expenses are high! I don't wonder any more – I know! The problem doesn't have anything to do with unfair regulations – it has to do with an abandonment of a tradition of outstanding customer service.

