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Learning to Love a Cable Guy

By [KEN BELSON](#)

When workers from [AT&T](#) and [Verizon](#) visit homes to install their new television services, they come with blue hospital booties that they slip over their shoes before going inside.

The sight of burly installers in dainty slip-ons might induce snickers. But the booties are just one of the many ways in which phone and cable companies are trying to reverse their reputations for shoddy service and win over customers who have a growing number of alternatives.

For years, service was an afterthought for these companies because customers had little choice but to get their phone and cable services from what were effectively monopolies. The litany of complaints is well known: long waits for repair visits, unresponsive call centers, high-priced and inflexible service plans. On customer satisfaction surveys, phone and cable companies often rank even below the airlines.

But service has improved slowly as satellite providers, upstart phone carriers and cellphone companies have provided attractive alternatives. And now that cable and phone companies are starting to sell similar bundles of phone, broadband Internet and television products — known in the industry as a triple play — they risk losing subscribers forever if they do not keep them happy.

“When you think of the triple-play customer at \$100 to \$120 and \$140, there’s certainly a lot more at stake,” said Ian Olgeirson, an analyst at Kagan Research, who calculated that the country’s largest cable companies increased spending on services by 48 percent in the first quarter compared with the same period in 2005. “There is this threat that someone could come in with a full bundle to take the customer away.”

That is what happened with one Verizon customer in New Jersey. In July, Joe Bender-Zanoni, a patent lawyer who lives in Little Falls, got fed up when Verizon took months to fix his phone line, which he said went down during heavy rainstorms. After repeated calls to the company and the state public utility commission, Mr. Bender-Zanoni signed up for phone service from [Cablevision](#), which already provided his television and broadband.

“Sheer anger led me to Cablevision,” he said. “Once I got aggravated with the phone company, I looked at their triple play. They actually answer their phones.”

In the world of competing triple plays, though, Mr. Bender-Zanoni said he would consider returning to Verizon if it started selling television along with phones and broadband lines, in his area. “If I don’t like Cablevision, when Verizon gets all wired up, the person with the best deal will be the one who gets all the services.”

A Verizon spokesman, Eric Rabe, said the company addressed Mr. Bender-Zanoni’s complaints before he left for Cablevision, which, Mr. Rabe said, had been aggressively discounting its phone service to win customers.

The growing competition is prompting changes in both the cable and phone industries. Verizon technicians who normally work outdoors splicing cables and the like are being trained to work on PC’s so when they install high-speed data lines, they can fix associated problems on customers’ computers, like viruses.

Verizon has developed a special knife that uses pressurized air to slice through lawns so fiber optic lines can be buried. The tool cuts through grass, but does not break sprinkler pipes and gas lines. Verizon also goes to great lengths to repair lawns where cables are buried. In Virginia, where the company has installed 4,141 miles of fiber optic cable so far, it has bought 283,147 pounds of grass seed.

Comcast is combating a major customer peeve: being transferred around when seeking service on the phone. The company has centralized its billing so operators, who receive about 200 million calls a year, can answer questions about all products. Comcast says operators now spend 8 minutes helping a customer with an installation, down from 12 minutes previously.

Comcast and other cable providers are bolstering their call centers because they now sell so many products, including digital video recorders, video on demand and phone service.

At Time Warner Cable’s call center in Flushing, Queens, 550 operators handle about 770,000 calls a month in five languages, and another 230,000 calls are answered by voice prompts, said Missy Mans, the head of operations there. The company has increased the number of operators at the center by 15 percent this year and plans a similar increase next year.

With 1.5 million customers in the New York City area, the calls run the gamut, from queries about equipment to people asking for directions to the nearest payment center. The average call is five and a half minutes, and agents handle several dozen calls a shift.

“There’s huge financial savings if we cut the average call to five minutes, but not if we don’t solve the problem,” said Glenn A. Britt, the chief executive of Time Warner Cable. “We don’t want to just push them off the phone.”

The cable industry’s service calls have also gotten an upgrade. Helver Gregory, a Time Warner Cable technician in Queens recognized his customer’s tight schedule recently as he took 15 minutes to install a digital video recorder, adjust the television and demonstrate how the new machine worked. Then he gathered his boxes, checked the carpet for scraps and left.

“Right now, my goal is to go to a house and give the best customer service so customers don’t think about changing companies,” Mr. Gregory said.

Cable and phone companies still get low marks from consumers for service, according to the widely watched American Customer Satisfaction Index compiled at the [University of Michigan](#). The cable and satellite industries, which the survey lumps together, got a score of 63 on a scale of 1 to 100 this year. That is below traditional phone companies at 70, airlines with 65 and fast-food restaurants at 77.

Customers still say they think that satellite television companies provide better customer service, but cable companies have narrowed the gap for three years running, according to J. D. Power & Associates. The addition of phone service is partly behind the improvement, the survey showed.

“The cable guys are playing the high-touch game on the telephone side,” Frank Perazzini, a director at J. D. Power, said. “They’ve been attentive to customer needs and it shows up in the customer service satisfaction ranking.”

The surveys suggest that customer perceptions of the quality of service are partly based on whether they think they are getting a good deal. This bodes well for the Bells as they enter the television business with products that are cheaper and, in some ways, more advanced than comparable cable products. They have also coddled customers with dedicated help lines, free wireless Internet routers and other goodies that have helped them grab up to 15 percent of the markets they have entered.

When the Bells began selling broadband in the form of digital subscriber lines in the late 1990’s, they sometimes advertised in places where service was still unavailable, giving potential customers a reason to call their cable provider. It took several years for the Bells to catch up, partly aided by heavy discounts.

Selling television service is even more complicated and involves many more variables, including set-top boxes that technicians typically must install. Customers are also less forgiving of problems with television service than they are with broadband lines, and that can lead to more complaints and higher service costs.

Cable and phone companies do not disclose how much they spend on customer service. But keeping customers happy is not cheap. Companies often find it hard to quantify how service contributes to the bottom line. So executives walk a fine line between spending on services with uncertain results and trimming budgets when times get tough, hoping customer complaints do not rise.

To keep costs down and speed response times, companies like [Time Warner](#) have been using e-mail and instant messaging to answer questions, with mixed success. Cable companies ignore 17 percent of the e-mail messages they receive, according to Terry Golesworthy, the president of the Customer Respect Group, which rates companies on their responsiveness.

“Their e-mails have gotten more helpful, but they’ve gotten slower,” he said.

Comcast’s efforts to improve its reputation for service suffered in June, when a customer in Washington videotaped a visiting repairman who fell asleep on his couch while waiting on hold with the company’s repair office. The customer put the video online where it drew thousands of viewers and was cited in television and newspaper reports.

Comcast fired the repairman and sent a vice president to help fix the customer’s Internet connection. But the incident seemed to tap into lingering widespread disdain for “the cable guy,” a sentiment that cable companies, as well as phone companies, continue to fight.

“There’s no question that cable has a legacy, and that it’s a legacy that takes time to overcome,” said Dave Watson, the executive vice president for operations at Comcast’s cable division. “We recognize that and we know we have to do better.”

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