



## BETWEEN THE LINES

by Dawn Chafe

### Cold calls

**T**his is the story of why I recently switched telecom providers — and why I’ll probably switch again in 24 months. If there’s one thing I’ve learned from the communications industry, it’s that loyalty gets you nowhere.

For more than 20 years, I used one supplier for my home phone, another for cable/internet and another for wireless. As long as the service was there when I needed it, I was relatively satisfied and contentedly paid my bills on time. Still, there were cracks in the relationship.

Take the contracts (please, take the contracts)... you sign up for a particular service at a particular price for a particular duration. Then, when your time is up, the price automatically jumps without warning — sometimes as much as \$50 a month. Meanwhile, you’re seeing ads from that same supplier, offering the same (or upgraded) service, in your area, at a lower price. You can usually get them to match price and service, provided you or your significant other (thank you, dear!) are willing to spend hours on the phone, negotiating your way through increasingly senior levels of customer service representatives. You know the script: the person who answers your call will empathize with your situation but they can’t do anything about it so they refer you to the next person up the line. This leads to a slightly sweeter deal, but it still doesn’t match what they’re offering new clients. Since existing clients are apparently less valuable than new ones, you talk about switching to their competitor. It’s only then, after you’ve threatened to throw the switch, that you’ll finally be connected with someone who has enough authority to give you (the loyal, bill-paying customer who’s been with them for years) the advertised deal — if you’re willing to sign another contract.

That’s pretty much how we’ve been operating for the past two decades. This past summer, however, was a game changer. Reliable internet access is a necessity for my husband’s home-based business. Time down is money lost, and we experienced more than 30 significant disruptions between July and August (many of them lasting over half a day during peak business hours). The supplier was apparently upgrading the service in our area, but didn’t see the need to either notify us in advance

or update us during the process. Yes, we were offered a credit — after repeated calls — but that couldn’t make up for the lost revenue.

Then, a knock at the door from the competition, announcing that their FibreOp network was now available in our area. They agreed to match the price and products we were getting with our existing supplier. More importantly, they promised reliable, state-of-the-art internet access with dedicated fibre to-the-home. This, we thought, was worth switching for. We set a date for the new install and anticipated its arrival with the excitement of six-year-olds on Christmas Eve. Shame on us for being so gullible.

We’d been warned that our current telecom would probably try to talk us out of the change. So when weeks went by with no contact from them, my husband called our friendly door-to-door sales rep to ensure he’d taken care of everything as promised. Only then, a couple of days before the scheduled installation, did we find out that there’d be a two-week delay. As for the pricing and service bundle, despite several verbal assurances, our request to receive the agreement in writing revealed a \$40 discrepancy between what we were promised and what was on file. Staff change and memories blur. Needless to say, we put the entire process on hold until we had written confirmation of the originally agreed-upon contract details. But, as my husband said at the time, it didn’t leave us with a very good feeling about our future with this supplier.

Today, we’re back where we were a month ago ... still waiting, albeit less eagerly, for the new service installation. As for our existing (now past) cable/internet provider, they finally called to see what it would take for us to stay. Their offer, a three-year deal that was significantly lower than our current rate, was too little, too late. We told them that we aren’t interested at this time, but we’ll keep them in mind the next time our contract is up for renewal. That is, after all, what they’ve taught us to do.

Dawn Chafe started with *Atlantic Business Magazine* as a freelancer 18 years ago, becoming editor in 1998.

#### FEEDBACK

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