

Is Time Warner Cable A Villain?

by Laura Forlano

Tuesday, January 01, 2002 12:00 AM

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At a time when Time Warner Cable has [announced](#) that it is raising its rates once again, at more than triple the rate of inflation, it has lowered its standards of service to its customers.

That at least is the experience of one customer who called me irate and frustrated -- and since he had a good tale to tell (and also because he is my editor), I listened. He had telephoned Time Warner to send somebody to repair his cable, because the reception was full of snow. It took an astonishing nine appointments over a period of six weeks, about 60 hours of waiting -- four days home from the office -- conversations with about 30 representatives from Time Warner AND they accidentally cut his telephone lines while attempting to fix his cable service. Oops.

He wrote a letter to Time Warner Cable's director of customer service. The company claims that all complaints are answered within two business days of receipt and that matters are resolved within 10 days. But he did not receive any letter in response after more than a month of waiting, and matters were certainly not resolved. So he sent a second letter to the director - only this time, he sent a copy to three agencies: the [New York Better Business Bureau](#) , the [New York State Public Service Commission](#) , the [New York City Department of Information Technology and Telecommunications \(DoITT\)](#)

The response was swift and excessive. Not only has his cable been fixed, but representatives from two different departments of Time Warner Cable, customer service and public affairs, have been calling HIM on the telephone (rather than the other way around). Each time they make reference to "the letter you wrote to the city." It is the New York Department of Information Technology and Telecommunications, then, that is the hero of this tale. And there is some evidence that they will continue to be the heroes, with Michael Bloomberg's appointment on December 19 of Vincent La Padula, formerly the chief of staff of DoITT, as the Senior Advisor to the Mayor. His job will be in part to oversee DoITT.

Time Warner Cable, on the other hand, is clearly this tale's villain. As of this writing two months after his cable first broke down, he still has not received any written correspondence from Time Warner Cable in response to his letters, and this is not the only explicit company policy the company has broken in this case. It claims on its web site, for example, that it respects the schedules of its busy customers and aims to limit waiting around for appointment (In all but one of the appointments, they repair technicians showed up later than the latest time they said they would). The representatives also have told him that in their computers they only have a record of two appointments made with him, not the nine that the repair technicians actually made with him, which is contrary to Time Warner Cable's policy of recording all appointments in its customer database.

Was all this just a fluke, or is this the norm in cable customer service?

In fact, the number of complaints against cable companies in New York City went up 50 percent

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from August to September, and surged once more in the month of October, according to the New York State Public Service Commission. Time Warner Cable's complaints in Brooklyn alone more than quadrupled from September to October. In fairness, these Brooklyn October complaints numbered only 21 (up from four in September). In the whole state, in the month of October, the cable company Cablevision received 84 complaints and Time Warner Cable received 135, 39 of them in Manhattan. And the New York Better Business Bureau, based on the small number of complaints it receives, lists Time Warner Cable as having a satisfactory record, meaning in part that it is free of an unusual volume of complaints.

Anecdotal evidence suggests many customers do not go to the trouble of making official complaints to the relevant regulatory agencies, so these numbers may not reflect the true level of dissatisfaction. But they are all we have to go on. Still, even accepting the official complaints as an accurate gauge, it is clear that the numbers have gone up dramatically in the last few months. The level of dissatisfaction is on the rise.

Is this a reflection of anti-consumer policies, or is there another explanation?

The cable company offers another explanation. Harriet Novet, a spokeswoman for Time Warner Cable, explained the surge in complaints in Brooklyn, for example, to the fact that many technicians were borrowed from that borough to aid in the round-the-clock efforts at the Mayor's Command Center in Manhattan. And, in general, the events of September 11th resulted in significant increased requests for cable, and that is what caused busy phone lines and extended waits for appointments. According to Time Warner Cable's web site, they are in need of more technicians, and they are hiring them.

This is of course a compelling response. Cable is widely regarded as the savior of news and information following September 11 as a result of interrupted broadcast and radio transmissions. (Many broadcast stations used the antenna on top of the Twin Towers.)

But this does not explain how, despite reduced customer service (for whatever reason), the cable companies can justify their decision to raise their rates by up to seven percent on February 1. This means that Time Warner Cable customers will pay about \$2.70 more for standard cable service. According to the [Federal Communications Commission \(FCC\)](#), last year, cable rates were increased by as much as 5.8 percent. So, why is the government backing Yet another rate increase now during a period of recession and low inflation (and poor service)?

Time Warner Cable attributes the increase to increased programming costs. Last year, the FCC reported that programming costs accounted for 41.4 to 44.1 percent of increases. But a Time Warner Cable's spokeswoman has claimed in the press that 85 percent of the current increase comes from "purchasing programming, especially sports," referring to an increase in the cost of ESPN programs. This is roughly double the amount of the rate increase justified by programming in 2000. What about customers who do not even watch sports?

Keeping prices reasonable is not the only priority of consumers. We also expect good quality service. As a member of the New York Better Business Bureau's 2001 Honesty Campaign,

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Time Warner Cable is officially committed to business integrity, trustworthiness and good standing in the community. So are they renegeing on their commitment? Are we going to be paying more but getting less in customer service?

Their customers are the ones who know. And you must report your complaints to the appropriate local, state and federal agencies (the addresses of some of which are on your cable bill). In the future, New York will benefit if more customers set aside their status as passive consumers and take action as citizens.

Why not tell us too?

Corporate Complaints:

Waiting weeks for utility installation? Spending hours on the phone waiting to speak with a customer service representative? Who would you nominate as the Worst Corporate Citizen of New York? Did the city do anything to help? Tell us your story. Please e-mail with subject head "Corporate Complaints" to info@gothamgazette.com . Thank you.

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