

# Why is Telstra customer service fundamentally broken?

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There are companies like Zappos that are hailed as a model of customer service. Indeed, it's as if Zappos is a "customer service" company that just incidentally sells shoes.

On the other extreme, we have TicketMaster, a business with such disdain for customers that if you can actually survive the ordering process you will be charged for the privilege.

Telstra may not be at the TicketMaster level, let's be fair, given they can and do provide a high-speed mobile network with greater regional reach than other carriers. Yet, there's no doubt that something is rotten within Telstra when the path to ordering a new NBN service is littered with errors, ambiguity, broken promises, abandoned steps and more.

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What exacerbates the problem is that while Telstra's executive in charge of customer service and call centres is happy to have her name emblazoned on every skerrick of documentation, she doesn't demonstrate a desire to improve the process or resolve customer concerns.

It's a truism that leaders can shape a company through their behaviour. The problem is sometimes that behaviour is not the cultural ideal a company would publicly advocate it adheres to. Consequently, it is not too difficult to grasp why front-line troops and back-office technicians aren't too worried about whether your connection works and faults are communicated if they observe that attitude from the top.

So, what happened? Here's my story.

The NBN became available in my area. FttN, but what can you do? Nevertheless, I looked forward to something superior to my 10Mbps

ADSL2.

## **Ordering**

I first sought to use Telstra's online ordering form. Despite asking me for my phone number, and address and even my Telstra account details, the form gave no confidence it would preserve the Foxtel, mobile phone, or static IP address on my account.

I thus ventured into a Telstra store on Monday, 3 April. In this conversation, I ordered an NBN 2Tb plan including the speed boost to 100Mbps. The information indicated I would have an experience between 33 and 66Mbps so I figured I would start at the top and work down.

I contracted the mobile phone on a new plan and was told it would take effect that day. We discussed the fact that I had had an Apple Music trial in the past. We discussed Foxtel and I was told I would need to re-add channels once the service was moved to NBN; for unknown reasons Telstra will gladly risk the revenue drop by putting customers on the basic package and make them put in the effort to get back to what they previously had.

I inquired about the different NBN routers and if the Gateway Max 2 was superior. The Telstra salesperson said no, it just had a USB port to share media across all devices. I didn't care much for that, running my own Plex media centre, so I opted for the basic gateway.

## **Apple Music**

The mobile phone plan change did not take effect until the following day. I received an email under the name of Fiona Hayes telling me the new contract came with an Apple Music 12-month trial membership.

That was pleasing and unexpected. Yet, I could not turn it on, with the iPhone saying there was no offer, and that my only choice was to pay.

I used Telstra's LiveChat to ask about this. I said I had Apple Music previously, but I had recontracted and I had an email stating I was eligible

for a 12-month trial. The LiveChat operator said, sure, he could enable that trial before going away and returning saying it was done. Yet, I still could not switch it on but he assured me it would work in 20 minutes and begged me to give him a good rating in the feedback survey to follow.

Foolishly, I did, and within 20 minutes after leaving him I received an e-mail telling me I was now paying for a new Apple Music service. Obviously, that's not what was discussed or promised. Telstra's "myaccount" portal still showed the old phone plan and did not allow me to self-service to deal with it myself.

I returned to Telstra's LiveChat and asked the operator there if I was entitled to a trial or not. If not, that was fine – though why tell me I was? Either way, I wanted the paid service to be removed, and he facilitated that.

Interestingly, I later received a letter in the mail – while all else was by e-mail – from Fiona Hayes thanking me for recontracting, and telling me all about my new plan. Yet, it was incorrect. Her letter went into depth about the plan I had switched from, not the new plan at all.

## **Telstra BigPond Broadband Protect**

I next received an email, again from Fiona Hayes, telling me about my NBN service, including that I had "opted" to take up a \$9.95/month service called "BigPond Broadband Protect." This was never mentioned in-store, I was not asked about it, and I most certainly did not agree to it.

After my previous experience I didn't trust Telstra's LiveChat so I phoned the store and was then informed this is bundled in free on the 2Tb plan I had subscribed to. Yet, while the paperwork alludes to the fact the service fee may be waived on some plans it does not list which plans they are and, worse, explicitly stated "Telstra Broadband Protect – Thanks for choosing to protect your Telstra home broadband service with Telstra Broadband Protect. You will be charged \$9.95 on your next bill and your Telstra Broadband Protect service will automatically renew each month unless you

decide to cancel it." There was no ambiguity whatsoever. Yet, according to the store, this was factually incorrect, and I would not be receiving a charge.

I was happy not to be charged, especially for a product never discussed with me, but Telstra absolutely needs to review the correspondence it is sending.

## **Router**

I received the Telstra Gateway Pro by post and as soon as I opened the box I saw it had a dismal two Ethernet ports. Some quick searching showed the Gateway Pro 2 has four Ethernet ports and superior Wi-Fi reach.

This was especially annoying as I had explicitly asked in the store what the differences between the routers were, and if the Wi-Fi was better, and other details. The Telstra salesman was very clear the only difference between the two units was the addition of a USB socket. This was wrong; not only did he not know, there were no brochures or other information available in-store to refer to.

## **Order incomplete**

My NBN connection went live on Friday 21 April. I had already configured and connected the router (the Gateway Pro 2, I will note, as I went out and sourced one) for my existing ADSL connection, using my preferred subnet, SSID and other details.

There was a short period of downtime but within 30 minutes I was online again. I had noticeably improved bandwidth, and the router showed VDSL on the line.

However, my bandwidth was limited to 25Mbps despite the router saying 44Mbps was attainable.

Visiting [telstra.com/myaccount](https://telstra.com/myaccount) still showed the old plan and it would not let me perform any self-service at all.

I had to leave the next day for Las Vegas to cover [Oracle+NetSuite SuiteWorld 2017](#), yet I monitored the myaccount page for any chance to review my current plan and its settings. There was no change, and when I returned to Australia on 29 April I phoned Telstra to discuss the issue.

I was told my order was showing as incomplete, but I had nothing to worry about; what happens is when an NBN service is connected there is still some work that takes 24-48 hours to complete at Telstra's back-end. So, the speaker said, don't worry, it will just happen.

I reminded him my connection was eight days earlier; did he mean 24-48 hours from eight days after connection or 24-48 hours from the connection? He apologised and said, oh, in that case, it is stuck, but again, not to worry, a case manager would have been automatically assigned and they will push it through to completion.

Well, I noted, no case manager had made any contact with me. I made the representative look, and sure enough, he said no case manager was assigned. Not sure what happened to the "automatically", but I asked him to help me get a case manager onto it. He then said I had to phone back on Monday as that department was closed.

And this is where I am right now.

### **So what went wrong?**

1. The paperwork should not state the customer has an offer or trial available to them for which they are, in fact, ineligible.
2. LiveChat staff should not beg for positive ratings.
3. LiveChat staff should not turn on a service which is chargeable if they have told the customer they are enabling a free trial.
4. The paperwork on new plans needs to be reviewed, as it is sending information on the old plan.
5. While at it, this should come by e-mail too. I don't understand why this one letter came by snail mail.
6. The paperwork should not state a bundled product is being billed.

7. Bundled items should be explicitly listed or discussed at the time of ordering.
8. Telstra sales staff need to know the differences between the NBN routers or have that information on-hand in some way.
9. Make sure the order goes through to completion. If a case manager is meant to be assigned when the order doesn't complete, then assign that case manager.

A company the size and scale of Telstra has many complex parts and processes, and I appreciate that. Yet, at the same time, this cannot be mere coincidence. It cannot be the case that just one simple person had had a run of bad luck where every step of the order has required micro-management and follow-up. I cannot believe it is just mere coincidence I have found these hiccups and ordinarily, everything would be super-smooth and transparent to the end customer.

## **Fiona Hayes**

I felt my experiences would be informative to Fiona Hayes. After all, her name was cheerily emblazoned as the sender on all correspondence from Telstra.

I advocate people write directly to the executives who gladly put their names on things. I don't say that to be a troll, but because executives ought to take it seriously if their name is on something.

In the past, I left the BUPA health fund and received a letter allegedly from an executive asking me to change my mind, and to phone their generic call centre number if I wished to discuss it. I didn't wish to call their generic call centre number so I wrote to him directly. He, of course, didn't respond personally but instead had one of his staff contact me. At least that was something.

Another time I received a letter from Energy Australia, again in the name of an executive, and with an error. I wrote to him, and he actually responded very positively and told me whom he would assign to resolve the

problem, and it was resolved. I was very pleased with the experience and kudos to Energy Australia for having an executive with the integrity to correct an issue in correspondence bearing his name and allowing me to get it resolved swiftly without having to explain the matter to a generic call centre operator after waiting on hold.

Another time, my mother received a letter from Telstra's Gerd Schenkel with erroneous content. I reached out to Gerd, though I noted his LinkedIn profile had him no longer at Telstra but that he was now chief executive of Tyro Payments. Even so, Schenkel passed on my correspondence to Laura Mazin, Telstra's executive director, Customer Experience, Telstra Retail. Mazin was very helpful and also requested a copy of the letter so she could address why Telstra was still sending out post under Gerd Schenkel's name some six months after he had moved on from Telstra.

So, most of the time this works and yields positive results. Again, my motivation is not simply to short-cut a queue but because if someone addresses a letter to me in the name of a specific human being, then I want that specific human being to be accountable for the content of their correspondence. I'm not so delusional as to believe they individually write these letters, but their name is on it and they ought to have the integrity to care about what is said in their name.

Thus, I wrote to Fiona Hayes. She'd sent me a number of letters now, with the above problems in them.

She lists her position on LinkedIn as executive director for Telstra's Global Contact Centres, though her letters list her title as head of Customer Service. In any case, it was her who was named in all the correspondence I received.

Hayes did not respond to me directly, but her executive assistant, Katherine, replied. She told me my matters were being escalated to the Executive Complaints Team.

I received one phone call, which I unfortunately missed. Kyle, from that

team, phoned on 11 April and said he would call again "soon."

He did not call back, so I phoned his number and left a voicemail for him. I did so again two days later. Yet Kyle never called back ... ever.

I replied to Katherine, CC'ing Fiona Hayes on 20 April to let them know I was not getting anywhere with the Executive Complaints Team. No response was forthcoming.

I wrote again and advised Fiona Hayes I was now finding this customer "experience" very frustrating and that I would document my journey on *iTWire*. I asked her for her opinion on the state of Telstra's customer service, and whether my situation was unique, and for any other guidance she may have.

Hayes chose, again, not to reply.

What is Hayes' view on customer service? What is Hayes' view on whether correspondence in an executive's name ought to have integrity? I would like to know, but to date, the silence is the only answer from which I can draw any conclusions.

While Telstra's Mazin had been so helpful previously, she moved on from Customer Experience in February to being the executive director, Telstra Business Transformation. Thus, this problem didn't fit into her remit, though I wish her luck in transforming Telstra.

Where am I at right now? To be fair, I have a new mobile plan, I have a working Foxtel subscription even if I had to add the channels myself, and I have a 25Mbps NBN connection.

What I don't have is any ability to review my plan or self-service on Telstra's myaccount page, I do not have the bandwidth I ordered or that my infrastructure can attain, and I do not have my static IP address and thus am impeded from connecting into my corporate network, or from connecting into my home network from outside. I do not have anybody working on my stuck order and, unless I intervene, nobody will.



What I also do not have is confidence that Telstra's executive team values customer service or has the impetus to review its processes and correspondence such that they actually work.