Consummate Consumer

Six Weeks Stuck In Comcast Limbo

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Like most Internet-dependent customers whose high-speed connection goes down, Apoorva Gandhi figured his service provider, Comcast, would have it up and running again soon after an interruption in March.

Annoying as they are, occasional server crashes are a fact of life online and Gandhi knew that. But six weeks later, he was still waiting for Comcast to fix his connection.

"It is ridiculous," says Gandhi, not related to the famous advocate of peaceful conflict resolution but showing similar patience and resolve. "It should be, I call once and then it's done. . . . But it was unreturned phone call after unreturned phone call."

A Bethesda business consultant who does much of his work from home, Gandhi can't afford to go without an Internet connection. Neither can his wife, Ruchi Sharma, who is starting a home-based interior design business. He loaded a free-trial America Online disc and reverted to using a dial-up connection while counting the days his high-speed service was down. "It was so slow," he says.

Gandhi says the first Comcast technician showed up in early April and told him "the 'drop' needed to be fixed and 'we'll get back to you' " -- corporate speak for don't call us, we'll call you.

When no one got back to him, he called Comcast once a day for four straight days asking to speak to a supervisor. No one returned his call, he says. He called Comcast's corporate office in Philadelphia, was assured the problem would be resolved immediately and was referred to a local Comcast executive who didn't return his calls. He again left daily messages for a week that weren't returned.

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Comcast finally notified Gandhi that a technician would repair the problem the next day -- but no one came. He called Comcast and reported the technician didn't show up, but no one called him back. He called again and was "lectured" by a customer service representative who told him, "Sometimes things happen and our techs don't come out."

One Comcast customer service rep tried to help, but couldn't get higher-ups to call Gandhi back, so the rep finally recommended that Gandhi "drive in-person to the Comcast office and confront..."
Comcast is one of Washington's largest ISPs, and nationally -- with 7.4 million customers -- it is the second largest provider next to AOL. Comcast has had technical and customer service issues before. In April, the company grappled with a network glitch that intermittently prevented customers nationwide from checking their e-mail accounts and accessing Web sites for hours at a time - though Gandhi's problem wasn't part of that.

This month's issue of PC World magazine surveyed 6,000 of its subscribers about ISP customer-support satisfaction. Comcast received middling grades (behind Time Warner Cable's Road Runner and Cox, but ahead of AOL, NetZero and MSN's dial-up service). Forty-eight percent of those surveyed said they were "satisfied or extremely satisfied" with Comcast's customer support and technical support, while the top ISPs scored more than 70 percent satisfaction.

After "the six-week debacle," Gandhi says he found the names and e-mail addresses of Comcast's board members online and e-mailed a complaint to them. "I tried to work this from the bottom up," he says. But when that didn't get the problem solved, he adds, "I decided to work from the top down."

A Comcast regional vice president contacted him, apologized and said he would compensate Gandhi 12 weeks of credit for his Internet and cable service -- twice the length of the outage. By early May, Comcast fixed Gandhi's Internet connection.

Comcast wouldn't address Gandhi's problem fully on the record. Spokesman Jeanne Russo e-mailed a statement: "We regret what happened in Mr. Gandhi's case and have offered him our sincere apologies. We want to stress that this was an unfortunate but isolated situation."

"Over 90 percent of our customers tell us that they'd recommend our service to their family or friends -- and we believe this is a great testament to how they feel about Comcast and the service we provide."

Gandhi doesn't count himself among that 90 percent.

"What I told them is, I feel like I've been wronged and here's their opportunity to do the right thing," says Gandhi, who wanted a year of free service. "To go through what I went through, they have a very unhappy customer."

Got questions? A consumer complaint? A helpful tip? E-mail details to oldenburgd@washpost.com or write Don Oldenburg, The Washington Post, 1150 15th St. NW, Washington, D.C. 20071.