

Choosing a carrier: Customer service

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Few industries can claim that a Federal Minister takes a close, regular and seemingly personal interest in the level of customer service they offer. But the telecommunications industry can do so ... albeit for all the wrong reasons: the minister concerned, Steven Conroy, thinks the industry "is simply not good enough" when it comes to customer service.

Conroy's remarks were made in response to the Telecommunications Industry Ombudsman's most recent report on complaints about telecommunications companies. This report revealed record levels of complaints. Businesses were well-represented among the complainants, with 8.4% of the 230,065 complaints the ombudsman received during 2008/2009 coming from small businesses.

Those complaints almost certainly represent time and effort that small business could usefully have directed into more productive efforts, waste that Tony Simmons, Managing Director of communications consultancy Full Circle Group, believes makes an assessment of carriers' customer service capabilities important. "Traditionally, when you buy something from a supplier you expect them to be interested in you," Simmons says. "But that just does not happen in telco-land."

Simmons says most carriers are "slow-moving beasts" and believes many are focussed on connectivity and increasing revenue from their customers, rather than measuring customer satisfaction.

Organisations who want a deeper, more productive relationship with their carriers therefore need to invest to create an interface with the carrier to ensure they get the service they deserve.

"As your telecommunications requirements become more complex, the carrier's management of your account become more important," Simmons says. "That's why we focus on account management, succession planning for account managers and even how monthly meetings are planned."

"We say you have to be on the front foot."

Simmons' company therefore builds what he calls "roadmaps" that explain how to engage with carriers to ensure you can get the attention you deserve.

"Unfortunately, you need to figure out how to do business on the telco's terms," he says.

Simmons believes such tactics are needed for all telecommunications customers, but Gary Tsang, an Industry Analyst with independent telecom market research and consultancy company Telsyte, thinks the very largest customers can dictate terms to carriers.

"Mid-market and large enterprise (MLE) customers [which Telsyte defines as having over 200 employees] are less likely to be concerned about customer service," Tsang says.

"Decision-makers believe quality customer service from their carrier is a given, with dedicated account managers looking after major business customers. Our recent survey has found that decision makers from the MLE segment are likely to see network coverage and network reliability as key selection criteria for telecommunication carriage services."

Yet while Tsang believes customer service is not a major selection criteria, he also says that even the largest customers cannot expect that carriers will always go out of their way to offer the very best service.

"Organisations should also develop internal processes to keep carriers honest," he advises. "Engaging an external party to undertake periodic benchmarks and audits is considered best practice in telecom expense management, to ensure competitive rates are being offered and that services are being charged correctly."