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I write about how companies make money (or should be making money).

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## How The FCC Saved Me \$1800

The Federal Communications Commission saved me \$1800 in a dispute with my ISP. How? By responding to a complaint I made within two days.

Yes.

Here is my story.

Close to a year ago I signed a two-year contract with my ISP to provide business-level service to my home office. The contract allowed that if I moved to an address where the ISP didn't provide this level of service I could break it without penalty. I did wind up moving out of its service area and I duly notified the company and faxed to it the necessary documentation. End of story, or so I thought.

Fast forward several months: I receive a bill for \$1800 for breaking my contract. I called customer service, of course, but made little headway with the reps over the course of my many, many phone calls to the company.

Then I receive another unpleasant and unexpected jolt: My account had been turned over to a third-party collections agency. For you folks out there who haven't had the pleasure, telling a third-party collections agent that 'this debt is a mistake' doesn't get you very far.

Fed up, I went online to file a complaint with the FCC.

The form, by the way, can be found [right here](#).

And like magic, my troubles were over.

Two days after I filed the report I got a call from a service rep at the ISP who assured me he was working on the problem. It was escalated and then escalated again. Actual contact was made with the third-party collections agency.

One week after I filled out my complaint I was able to independently verify that 1) the ISP had closed its account on me with the third-party collections agency 2) my credit report had not been dinged.

Did I mention that form can be found [here](#)?

### **What Is New About the FCC?**

Contacting the FCC for help is hardly a novel idea of course. It is the government agency, after all, that regulates telecom providers. But something has been different lately regarding that agency — a sense I picked up on Reddit as I poked around looking for advice.

My question was why — and how?

One prevailing theory is that the FCC has found its mojo due to the new net neutrality rules that have been in effect for about two weeks or so. Thing is ... there have only been two complaints filed to date on net neutrality. Mine certainly wasn't one of them. Indeed the FCC handles a wide range of issues, not just net neutrality.

Another theory is that ISPs are seeking to short circuit the argument that arises whenever a merger or acquisition is proposed, which is that the dreadful customer service typical of the industry would get even worse. It may be that the industry is seeking to improve its reputation to put this argument to rest.

Somehow this doesn't resonate either — antitrust is about competition, not customer service. Although it can be argued that lack of the former leads to lack of the latter.

Or maybe the industry is just getting tired of all the hate.

### **What The FCC Said**

Curious, I called the FCC to ask. The media representative couldn't speak to my specific issue — but he did suggest that the [new consumer help center](#) that the agency launched at the start of the year might have had something to do with it.

And just like that, it's bingo.

Tell me more, I said.

Under the previous system, customer complaints would be lodged through the FCC's 800 number or other online forms. These, though, had a turnaround time of 30 days — that, at least was how long the ISPs had to respond. Furthermore tracking was minimal at best.

The new site has far better tracking and the complaints are sent to the ISPs twice a week. The FCC's goal had been to send them once a week when the site launched but that hasn't happened yet.

So it is not that the FCC's enforcement capabilities have developed sharper teeth. The answer, it would appear, is that technology has made it easier to nudge the ISPs to action. I would guess the implicit threat that a complaint has been lodged and is now being tracked by both the consumer and the agency plays a role as well.

The new site also provides some interesting top-level data about the complaints that could be helpful to the industry. Complaints can be analyzed by category (such as phone or TV), by service type (such as cable or broadcast) and by U.S. state.

For example, since the new site launched at the beginning of the year 75 percent of the complaints received by the FCC have been about phone service. Some 12.8 percent have been about Internet service; 0.2 percent have been about emergency services and 1.8 percent about radio.

I will leave the industry analysis of these stats to others.

The bigger takeaway from this episode is that customer service technology amplified the customer's voice to solve a problem that didn't appear to be getting resolved otherwise.

It is not a novel insight – indeed, Voice of the Customer, or social listening technology as it is sometimes called, is a robust sector within CRM.

What's interesting is that in this particular case the technology was deployed by a regulator.

Are you listening companies?

*Come back for my next post where I give companies some tips on how to hack their ineffective customer service operations.*

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