

Comcast Must Die

by

Dennis D. McDonald, Ph.D.¹

April 9, 2013

I feel sorry for Comcast customer support staff. I really do. I've worked with other customer support operations and IT staff members before and know what they must go through as, day-to-day, they deal with disgruntled or irate customers.

I'm sure that much of the stress experienced by Comcast customer support reps is not of their own doing but is based on their being Comcast's first line of defense as it works to maintain and grow revenue in noncompetitive markets.



After much deliberation last year I had switched to Comcast Internet from Verizon DSL. For the price of Verizon's DSL supplied Internet I was able to get much faster Comcast service which has revealed itself, most noticeably, in better streaming movies from Netflix and Amazon. The pricing was repeated by three separate Comcast phone sales reps.

For the most part I've been satisfied with the Internet service. Still, years of Comcast cable TV service had taught me the wisdom of keeping track of monthly bills. I had also learned from the cable TV side of Comcast that what the sales people tell you over the phone and what eventually shows up on your bill are sometimes two separate things. Add to that Comcast's confusing and opaque cable TV pricing and its constantly changing and confusingly named channel packages, and you can understand why vigilance is necessary.

This was demonstrated to me recently when I opened up my latest Comcast bill:

¹ Copyright (c) 2013 by Dennis D. McDonald, Ph.D. Dennis is a Washington DC area consultant specializing in digital strategy, collaborative project management, and new technology adoption. His clients have included the US Department of Veterans Affairs, the US Environmental Protection Agency, Jive Software, the National Library of Medicine, the National Academy of Engineering, Social Media Today and Oracle, and the World Bank Group. His experience includes the management of projects involving the conversion or migration of financial and transaction data associated with large and small systems. Contact Dennis via email at ddmcd@yahoo.com or by phone at 703-402-7382. The current version of this document is located [here](#).

1. I was now being charged for the two cable TV "digital transport adapters" that had been explicitly described to me as "free" when Comcast shifted from analog to digital transmission.
2. There was a mysterious item named "Streampix" listed for zero dollars on my bill, labeled as a "promotion."
3. My monthly Internet service bill, labeled as "promotional," had almost doubled.

So I called customer support and asked about the bill. I talked to a nice lady who was the soul of politeness. Yes, she said, pricing on the previously "free" adapters had changed recently. She made no attempt to hide that fact. She said there was nothing I could do about it but go to the website and write letters complaining to Comcast. She did admit that I may have been "misinformed" when I had been told that the first two adapters were free.

I then asked about the Streampix "promotional" item on the bill. She could not explain how it had showed up but noted that it covered a group of older TV shows and movies made available as streaming services through the Xfinity Internet service. I have occasionally experimented with streaming services via the awkward Xfinity iPhone app. Since most of the Streampix shows are junky cooking, reality, and redecorating shows, I asked her to remove it -- especially after she explained that the price would rise to four dollars per month in September.

Then we discussed the increased Internet service charge. I explained the pricing had been given to me by three separate Comcast sales reps, that the price had never been identified by them as a temporary "promotional" price, and that my switch from Verizon DSL, e-mail, website hosting and storage had only been made after much deliberation.

Again, she admitted I had possibly been "misinformed" by Comcast sales staff. Again, she could do nothing and recommended I write a letter to Comcast.

After hanging up I called the Alexandria Virginia city governments cable TV office. I had talked with them before when we had switched to digital from analog TV service and all my TVs had suddenly needed the special TV adapters to get basic cable. He listened to my tale of woe, having heard it all before, and he said he would call Comcast on my behalf. Which he did. A day later I received a call from Philadelphia from another and more official sounding Comcast customer service rep. I explained my situation.

She couldn't change the digital adapter pricing but, by playing with how prices are recorded she could continue offering at least two of my four adapters for free for the next 12 months and give me a credit.

Regarding the Internet service pricing, she also agreed to continue the "promotional" price for

another year. Again, she described how she would use some existing fields in the pricing matrix to continue offering me the original agreed-upon price. I pretended to understand. What it sounded like was that Comcast is using existing fields in its financial system to accommodate pricing relief while at the same time enabling original values to be reported, but that's just a guess on my part.

I had to sigh at all of this, of course. I have to go through all of this again in another year. Verizon FIOS is never going to come to Alexandria, and Google fiber won't be coming here anytime soon either. Maybe [Aereo](#) will be the solution, but who knows?

I took back two of my digital adapters to Comcast anyway. I don't watch much TV anymore since I have Netflix, Amazon, and Vudu on various devices, and the guest bedroom and basement TVs are rarely used. (Side note: When I got home I found that one of my two remaining digital adapters had been mistakenly de-authorized when I took back the other two, so I had to go through another time consuming session with customer support to get the adapter "re-authorized.")

In summary, my experience with Comcast over the years has left a bad taste in my mouth:

1. The Comcast phone sales department will tell you anything to get your business, including "misinforming" you about your bill. I don't think this is an accident.
2. "Slamming" by adding unordered items to your bill is a normal business practice. (Streampix was not the first time this has happened to me.)
3. Requiring digital adapters to decrypt even "basic" cable TV channels has added another layer of DRM enforcement and equipment to go wrong.
4. Much of Comcast revenue requires customers to not pay close attention to what they are actually paying for.
5. Equipment rental prices are obscene especially since many of the rented items cannot be purchased. (How much do those crappy digital adapters cost, anyway? \$5? \$10? And they're asking \$1.99 per month to rent them.)
6. Salaried local government employees are supplementing Comcast customer support staff. Who is paying for that service?
7. The games being played to provide discounts and credits to accommodate irate customers makes me seriously question the accuracy and transparency of the monthly printed bill.
8. Your final pricing with Comcast is as dependent on your negotiating skills as it is on Comcast's price lists. This leads me to question what Comcast's actual pricing policies are.
9. Such shenanigans would not be possible if Comcast didn't have government sanctioned monopolies throughout the U.S.

My goal eventually is to get rid of cable TV altogether through a combination of antenna and Internet access, but I have no doubt Comcast will continue to shift price increases over to the Internet side of the business to maintain its revenue stream as more people "cut the cord."

Having to pay for and subsidize so many useless TV channels has long been a source of chagrin. Then having to subsidize layers of administrative and support costs on top of unneeded DRM, error-prone service, and deceptive sales practices is outrageous. The icing on the cake is that, not only are many local TV channels available over the air for free in high definition, but as I found out recently while experimenting with a makeshift antenna on one of my newer digital TVs, the image quality significantly outshines what I'm getting via cable.

Ain't monopolies wonderful?