

Comcast (Community – Product)

How Comcast was one of America's most hated companies at one time, and why, despite a new look, things can't have changed much behind the scenes.

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Cable companies are usually on the receiving end of a lot of consumer criticism in the United States. It's become quite common to hear about nightmarish customer service experiences, faulty equipment, costly billing errors and, most important of all, unreliable internet connections. One company that has developed the unenviable reputation of being particularly problematic, even for the industry, is Comcast.

Bad Customer Satisfaction

In [2004](#) and 2007, the [American Customer Satisfaction Index](#) (ACSI) survey found that Comcast had the some of the worst customer satisfaction ratings of any company or government agency in the country. In 2008, the cable behemoth scored in the [bottom 5](#) of J.D. Power and Associates' annual customer satisfaction survey for each region of the country. Consumerist named them America's worst company in [2010](#) and then again in [2014](#). In fact, Comcast managed to find a spot in the top 3 of that poll in [2008](#), 2009, [2011](#) and [2013](#). In 2017, the conglomerate was named the [most hated in the country](#) by a different publication, 24/7 Wall Street. They took into account ACSI customer surveys, employee reviews on Glassdoor, and the site's own customer satisfaction surveys. As recently as 2020, the telecom group found itself in the bottom 10 of the [Axios Harris Poll](#) of corporate reputations for the 100 most visible firms nationwide.

It would be interesting to note some of the more sensational stories over the years from shocked customers. After Hurricane Ike hit the Galveston, Texas area in 2008, [one customer reported a \\$931 bill](#) based on the failure to return rented equipment. A call to customer service led to her being informed that she was expected to dig through the debris of her hurricane-ravaged house to find the equipment and send it back. It could be argued that the company had every right to charge for lost property and that their only fault in this situation was being insensitive.

However, there are also the infamous stories of Comcast's frustrating efforts to deprive a customer of their right to cancel their service. [Ryan Block](#) and his family were simply calling to opt out of their internet subscription. They were met with an [aggressive employee](#) who argued with the couple for nearly twenty minutes about why they wanted to cancel. Despite Mr. Block's calm tone asking for the cancellation, the persistent employee kept dismissing their responses and repeated his questions in a condescending manner, refusing to process the request. Mr. Block's [story](#) was one of many instances of Comcast customers receiving horrible customer service.

In 2014, Chicago-area resident Gary O'Reilly had purchased a wide range of Comcast services – internet, cable, a smart home system – for his family after moving to their new home. The smart home system came with a faulty thermostat which prevented Mr. O'Reilly from setting up heating in one half of his house. The family, which included his pregnant wife and 2-year-old son, were left freezing for several days. Technicians eventually came to replace the faulty thermostat but provided him with the bill for the new equipment. Mr. O'Reilly claimed to have spent eight to ten hours speaking to customer service to get the charges removed. Unfortunately, the thermostats kept failing and the family had to keep getting them replaced. Each time, they would get charged for new equipment and he had to spend hours to get the charges removed. After the fourth failed thermostat, he decided to spend hours cancelling the service rather than getting a new one. This led to a \$1000 termination charge.

Mr. O'Reilly's [subsequent struggle](#) to resolve the issue is equally interesting. However, his case indicates a [pattern of behavior](#) at Comcast. Customers have complained of being left [on hold for as long as three hours](#), being [mistakenly charged for services](#) and not being able to get the charges removed, and even receiving bills with their names replaced by [explicit insults](#).

Anti-competitive lobbying

With so many people facing issues, it may be confusing as to why the company hasn't done more to improve its service. In a large part of its coverage areas, Comcast has a near monopoly on the market and is often the only option for residents. It can provide sub-standard internet connections in rural areas and even cities where it has [non-compete agreements](#) blocking other entrants. Many cities are in these [long-term agreements](#) with telecom companies called [franchise agreements](#) that create a legal obstacle against free market competition from solving the problem. This lack of competition means that connections in these areas are slow, unreliable and expensive.

Portland, Oregon's [agreement](#) with Comcast [means](#) that the company gets to connect government buildings in the city to the internet, and the city pays for construction and installation. Moreover, while the deal doesn't prohibit Portland from starting its own fiber network, it requires that two years' notice be provided to Comcast. This acts as a barrier to the city and gives the company ample time to improve services and prices if faced with competition.

Internet service providers (ISPs) like Comcast spend a significant amount of money making [campaign contributions](#) to politicians and lobbying municipal governments to prevent them from setting up their own broadband networks. They often own the rights to the physical infrastructure required to set up a new network and restrict access to new entrants. While some cities like Chattanooga, Tennessee managed to build their own networks and get into the retail broadband business, most, like San Francisco, are blocked by Comcast and other telecom giants.

In the [case](#) of Chattanooga, Comcast sued the city in 2008 for trying to raise money to build their own connections, citing state laws that it claimed prohibited the city's actions. The city won the lawsuit and the company was forced to offer its own 2-gigabit service to compete with the city's network.

In 2015, *VICE* compiled a [list](#) of 21 states with laws either restricting or completely banning community-built broadband networks. This has made it difficult for municipal governments to provide their communities with [fast, affordable internet connections](#). According to a [report](#) by BroadbandNow, in 2019, a total of 26 states restricted or prohibited towns or cities from making their own networks. Telecom giants like Comcast prefer to spend money on getting lawmakers to pass anti-competitive legislation instead of providing better service.

Merger with Time Warner

It isn't surprising that Comcast's [attempted acquisition](#) of TimeWarner back in 2015 fell apart. The merger planned to join the largest cable operators in the country to cement Comcast's position as a keeper of the internet. The new firm would have controlled [roughly 57 percent](#) of the broadband market in the US, leaving consumers in many areas with few other options. The new company would have even less incentive to provide affordable, fast internet connections. Regulators realized the dangers of allowing the firm more monopoly power and prepared measures to block the deal.

Recent Performance

There has been [significant improvement](#) in customer service this year. In 2020, the ACSI released its annual customer satisfaction report that found Comcast's Xfinity brand had the most overall improvement in the telecom sector. The company has tried to address its poor public relations and has made attempts to ensure that disastrous calls like Mr. Block's don't take place. However, their anti-competitive practices continue. In the long run, this will probably be the thing that affects consumers the most.

Rating: 3

Customer service at such a large organization would be difficult to manage. But, Comcast has clearly been pushing its employees into situations where they have an adversarial relationship with customers. They have consistently attempted to get out of investing in new technology by spending money on influencing legislation. In the modern world, the internet is increasingly becoming an absolute necessity. Their attempts at monopolizing certain areas means that many communities find themselves without access to proper internet connections, which could be easily provided by other entrants.