

Right of Return: Sprint's Satisfaction Guarantee

By **Ed Finegold**

If I were selling hair gel door-to-door, my first stop would be every wireless carrier's retail stores in my territory. Maybe I'm jealous because I lost my hair years ago. Maybe I just don't understand current hairstyles. Regardless, I can't understand why the guys who work in mobile stores (and it's almost always exclusively guys in their 20s) look like they just came from a night out with Taylor Lautner, Justin Bieber, and a marketing rep for Axe Body Spray. It doesn't scream 'customer care' to me, which is why I find Sprint's new 30-day money back guarantee somewhat refreshing.

"But it's 4G, I can take this anywhere. We can watch Hulu on the way to Michigan!"



My 4G Disappointment

I've been pretty positive about 4G's imminent emergence. When I realized I could snag one of those sexy new Sierra Wireless 3G/4G hotspots from Sprint and actually receive 4G coverage in Chicago I went for it. The online ordering process was simple. In thirty seconds, I even Googled a valid discount code for a \$50 invoice credit. Within a couple of days, a slick black box arrived with my new device inside. I charged it up, followed the instructions, and it automatically connected to the 4G network and to my PC via WiFi.

"Brilliant," I thought. "This is how things should work."

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My wife couldn't understand why it made me so happy to use the Internet through this new little gadget when our WiFi at home works just fine. "But it's 4G," I exclaimed. "I can take this anywhere. We can watch Hulu on the way to Michigan!" She smiled and said, "oh, that's great honey," and went back to chasing after our daughter.

Unfortunately, my excitement was short-lived.

In my office the next day, I switched the Altoids-sized box on and watched it connect to 4G...then fail over to 3G. I put it on the window sill. Bing! It swung back to 4G coverage. "Okay," I thought, "I can live with that." I fired up my PC and...nothing happened. I could see the device as a WiFi network, but I could not connect to it. I tried turning off the security settings. That didn't work. I tried a hard reset on the device to start over from what had worked the previous day. No dice. So I did what many people dread: I called Sprint's tech support line.

My Tech Dumped Me

I told the tech to whom I was routed that I'd tried everything and just needed the code to restore the

factory settings on the device. He insisted on walking me through all of the things I'd already tried. Of course none of them worked. In between each step, he put me on hold for five or ten minutes—probably to field and resolve other calls and protect his metrics. That's my guess anyway. After forty-five minutes with no luck, I told him I'd continue to work the problem since restoring the factory settings hadn't helped. He said he'd call me back in the morning.

"Did he just dump me on you?" I asked. "Yeah, probably," the tech responded.

To his credit, he did. We spent another hour on the phone going in circles, with him begging me not to fill out a survey I might receive to say he did not resolve my problem (I never received one). He finally decided to call in the big guns, or so I thought. He said he was going to conference in a senior technician to help us fix the problem. I heard him dial. I heard another tech answer. And then he was gone like promises after a



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"Uhh...hello?" I asked.

"Can I have your name and mobile number please?" the new tech asked me.

"Where's the other guy?" I wondered aloud.

"What other guy? How can I help you?"

I told him what had been happening, and that the previous tech was supposed to conference him in. And then it all came into focus.

"Did he just dump me on you?" I asked.

"Yeah, probably," the new tech responded without the slightest hint of surprise.

My bet is that the first tech knew he couldn't resolve my problem, so he called it an escalation or some such, and dumped me on some other poor schnook to protect his own metrics. Nice.

Well, the new guy sounded geekier at least. Not necessarily smarter, but somehow more nerdy and therefore, in my estimation, more likely to solve my problem. You know what they say about assumptions. After 30 minutes he said, "I'm going to need to read up on this and call you back."

That call never came.

I called Sprint's returns hotline and asked if I could walk over to the local corporate store, which is close to my office, and try a different device. Maybe something in the WiFi antenna had shorted out on the first one...? It was worth a shot. I found the returns desk to be helpful and cooperative, though I figured it was because I only wanted to exchange the device, not dump the service altogether.

...At first.

In the end, the mail-in return process was an easy, positive, and well executed process.

The Hair Gel Man Cave

And that was when I entered the man-cave of excess hair gel. I explained the problem. They looked at my account through their POS system and saw the exchange was all set up already. They exchanged my



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device. And then Chad, I think his name was, asked me who my cell carrier is. Are you kidding? You're going to try to sell me a phone after what I just told you I'd been through?

"My company provides my phone," I told him to push him off.

"Oh," he said, "who do they use?"

"Verizon."

"Well," he said handing me his card, "we have better deals than they do. You should have whoever manages the phones at your company call me to talk about it."

I should have done exactly that because the guys at Validas, where I work my day job, have made careers

For years the industry has talked about the 'holistic' customer experience, to the point where the word is an absolute cliché.

out of whipping guys like Chad into shape. But I was merciful. "You really don't want me to do that," I said. Then I walked out with my second new device.

When I returned to my office, I had the same problem. This time, I didn't bother with tech support at Sprint. I went to Sierra Wireless' site. I found an interesting entry in the support forums – the type of device I was using has trouble in 'noisy' WiFi environments. I was having a channel conflict with some other WiFi router in my building. It said to try a hard-set of the channel. I did so. It still didn't work. I tried a few other channels. No joy.

I called the returns desk again. The extremely helpful and friendly agent said she was sorry I'd had so much trouble and would be happy to send a return kit. I explained I was leaving the country that night and would gladly return it to the store. She agreed and said she'd alert the store that I was coming.

So back I went to the greasy man-cave. This time, it was Tex, sporting both too much hair gel and a waistline that gives Silent Bob a run for his money. He told me he couldn't process my return because Chad, in his excitement to sell me a new phone, had messed up my exchange for reasons I still don't quite understand. More likely Tex just didn't want to run his sausage-like fingers through the gauntlet necessary to process my return because he wouldn't be paid a commission for it. So I left the country, sent a few e-mails through my Blackberry to Sprint to cover my tracks, and enjoyed my vacation.

When I returned from vacation I called Sprint's returns desk again. Cayla, who answered, was friendly and helpful. She also couldn't understand why Tex didn't process my return two weeks earlier, but she was happy to send me a return kit. A few days later, a UPS envelope with a label and instructions arrived. I packaged up the device and dropped it off at a local UPS store. I received a courtesy call from Sprint the next day to make sure I'd sent my device back and letting me know they'd credit my charge card as soon as they got the equipment. In the end, the mail-in return process was an easy, positive, and well executed process. The antithesis of everything else I had endured in my tech support and in-store experiences.

I just had to ask why? Why the disparity? Why make it so easy to purchase and return a device, and yet so difficult to make it work the way it should?

The Best Desk of All

I called Sprint's PR team and asked specifically whether the returns desk is staffed with more experienced agents. I figured if this was a new push for the company, they probably wanted some of their best and most helpful care agents managing it.

But Sprint Public Relations Manager Roni Singleton says, "Sprint care agents that handle returns and cancellations are part of our general customer service organization. I think what you may have experienced is simply part of the overall improvements we've made to customer service and the customer experience. The areas Sprint has focused on include

providing more consistent and quality support from care agents to ultimately lead to better first call resolution. There has also been a priority placed in increasing the satisfaction customers have with us when they call us.”

When I asked the softball question of where the idea of a 30-day return policy originated, I received a softball answer. Singleton replied, “It essentially came from the idea that we love and believe in our products and services and because we are confident that our customers will too, we wanted to make it easier for customers to sign up with Sprint.”

I guess didn’t expect them to say that it’s because Sprint is seeing a net-loss of hundreds of thousands of subscribers every quarter and is desperate to win new ones any way they can.

Despite the rhetoric, I have to give Sprint some credit. Honoring a 30-day return policy without haranguing customers into staying– or trying to upsell them in the midst of the returns process– is fair, honest, and decent. I felt as though I were being treated as a person rather than as a number, wallet, or moron. I think the entire wireless industry would benefit from

behaving this way, rather than wrapping customers up with threats, penalties, and irritating hurdles.

That said, the inconsistency across the customer experience is disappointing. Being literally dumped by two different tech-support agents who couldn’t come close to solving a problem I ultimately identified in the manufacturer’s online support forum is embarrassing. It says the product rolled out without the techs being educated properly. It also says that the metrics used to measure their successes and failures aren’t reinforcing the right behavior – the techs were playing CYA at the customer’s expense, and it cost Sprint a paying customer.

As bad, the in-store experience could not have been more different than that of the contact center. Instead of being greeted by a friendly, courteous person who clearly wanted to help me and would be evaluated on her ability to do so, I encountered creeps who didn’t want to help me, tried to up sell me in a completely inappropriate way, and who didn’t present themselves as the least bit trustworthy or knowledgeable.

For years the industry has talked about the ‘holistic’ customer experience, to the point where the word



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is an absolute cliché. In my experience with Sprint, part of that holistic experience was more positive than any customer experience I've had with any mobile operator ever. But, it was soured by its utter lack of consistency across channels and processes. If the returns process received an A overall, the in-store process was a C- at best and the tech support process gets a big fat F. That's a GPA of 1.9, which means academic probation with a real possibility of flunking out.

For any company, that's bad news. For a wireless carrier on the ropes when it comes to customer retention and acquisition, it's unsustainable. Sprint deserves a lot of credit for trying to turn the tide and move the industry in a positive direction, but it still has a lot of work to do to transform its business – as it claims to be – through a superior, end-to-end customer experience.