

## So many seams: Smoothing out CEM

By: Tim Young

**Confession time:** I have never been happy with my cell phone provider.

*Never.*

In the couple of decades that I've had a mobile phone, I've had service through at least five different providers, sometimes churning away from one CSP and eventually looping back years later, hopeful that any issues from before had been resolved. "This time will be different," I say.

*And it never is.*

I'll admit that, like most other modern wireless customers, I have high expectations. And in some ways, those expectations have been met or exceeded over the years! My calls are almost never dropped. The quality of my connection is almost always clear. I get a signal almost everywhere I go (and am secretly happy that there are still a few places out in the hinterlands where I get zero bars, for the sake of an occasional quiet vacation). My handset does incredible things, and even with one of the higher-cost carriers, I think there's a good bit of value for the money I spend.

*So what's my complaint? What more could I want?*



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A dark green rectangular advertisement for Lotus Innovations. At the top center is a white lotus flower logo with the text "LOTUS INNOVATIONS" underneath. Below the logo, the text "UNIQUE • EXPERIENCED • SUCCESSFUL" is displayed in a large, white, serif font. Underneath that, in a smaller white font, is the text: "The Lotus Innovations Fund™ is a private equity fund that builds wealth for its investors by acquiring, transforming, and exiting high-potential, small to mid-size high technology companies that serve large enterprise customers in enterprise IT and telecom." At the bottom of the ad, the website "www.lotus-innovations.com" is listed in white. Below the website, there is a light grey bar with the text "Click this ad for more information" in a small, dark font, flanked by two small white circles.

**Second confession:** I hate playing the game. I hate haggling. That's true for used cars, cell phones, or flea market pots and pans. I'll go down the rabbit hole of coupon codes and special offers and all that jazz, but the more hoops I have to jump through, the less happy I am about the whole interaction.

I want a reasonable deal and am willing to pay a reasonable price for it. I like offers to be consistent and hate having to escalate, escalate, escalate to get the better deal that I know exists. I don't always need the *best* deal, even. But when I know that the system contains lots of opportunity for savings, I'd be a chump to pay full freight.

And almost every interaction I've had with a wireless provider makes me feel like I'm right on the edge of being a big ol' chump.

I renewed my mobile plan last summer. Two smartphones, unlimited plan, with a perfectly attractive monthly bill, from my CSP's point of view. I went into the provider's retail location around the corner from my house, and a teenager with her feet up on the desk (and no shoes on) offered me a terrible deal. So I went online and got a different, but still pretty rotten, deal. So I called the provider and got yet another offer for a still-not-great deal.

Then I went to the Apple Store and walked out with two iPhones for next-to-nothing and an extension of the plan I was already happy with. The whole thing took 15 minutes.

In the end, sure, my provider gets my money, but they don't get my loyalty. My loyalty goes to the company with the knowledgeable customer service rep who whisked me through the process in no time and sent me on my way with the hardware I wanted for a very low out-of-pocket cost. I'm much more likely to switch providers than I am to switch handsets, because nothing about my positive customer experience had a thing to do with my CSP.

It's not just my cell phone. I hate having to do the dance with my broadband provider every six months when my promotional offer wears off and I have to threaten to switch providers. It's not an empty threat. I really am on the verge of switching every time I call. And was even closer to switching this last go-round when I was told by a rep over the phone that she could sign me up for one promotional rate, but I could get an even lower rate if I went in to the local retail location and asked someone there for a better deal. It all felt tawdry, and in the end, the provider didn't get any more money out of me. They just inched me closer to churning.

Look, I know this isn't a confessional, and there is nothing rare about my experience. But why, in an environment of ample choice and widespread competition, is there *nothing rare about my experience*?

We've [talked for years and years](#) about the seamless customer experience. We've talked about [delighting customers](#), the [omnichannel experience](#) and [creating a customer-first culture](#). And CSPs have dumped lots of time and energy into these efforts over the years.

*But despite these efforts to promote a seamless experience, there are still **SO. MANY. SEAMS.***

In a recent Salesforce.com [survey of about 2,000 wireless subscribers](#) in the United States, less than 10 percent of respondents said they've had an in-person customer service agent or retail clerk from their CSP access a shopping cart that they started through another method (online, via app, etc.). For Baby Boomers, that figure was 1 percent.

When asked about what might make them more likely to stick with their service providers, almost half of respondents said a monthly flat rate, more than a quarter said simpler billing, and about the same number said better access to customer service across channels. These calls for access and simplicity were more important to subscribers than having more digital services (such as video streaming) or having more customer self-service.

And respondents want proactivity! Almost half said they would be less likely to churn if their CSPs notified them about better plans or offers, or about service disruptions in their areas. More than a third said they'd be more likely to stick around if they didn't have to repeat their information or story to everyone they spoke with.

It's also no big surprise, but Millennials, especially, wanted simplicity and seamless interaction more than any other group. That's the expectation, and it's only growing.

Vendors are doing their part to reevaluate what it means to meet and exceed customer expectation and deliver an outstanding customer experience. And part of that puzzle comes down to having good data about customer behavior and leveraging that data to enhance customer care.

IBM's Watson Customer Engagement suite for telecom, for instance, is one of many solutions that is working to leverage customer data to enhance proactive customer care. It's interesting to see how Big Blue is taking advantage of the really interesting cognitive learning of Watson to support consistent, personalized messaging and support for subscribers.

Amdocs is another firm that is doing interesting things with omnichannel customer engagement,

focusing on consistent conversations in all settings: retail, social media, call centers, online self-service portals, and more. Amdocs positions its customer engagement solutions as part of its larger “digital experience” offering, rightly noting that personalized customer interaction is an opportunity, not a hindrance for CSPs.

I know that the comparisons aren’t always fair. The brands that deliver truly outstanding customer experience—Apple, Amazon, Starbucks, BMW, Disney, etc.—are companies with which you interact only occasionally. But those companies also lack the enormous insight and wealth of information carriers have. And their product is, in so many ways, better than ever.

I appreciate my network and my handset and the beautiful rarity of my dropped calls. I just want all that *and* a consistent and positive customer experience on the rare occasion that it’s time to re-up my plan or get a new device.

*So I guess I want it all. But I’m not alone.*