

## We'll fix it in a few months

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London is the new 'it' city, have you heard? The stock market is booming, housing is red hot, even British cuisine is setting global trends. According to New York Magazine, London now dominates New York on most fronts.

And so when my family jumped across the pond 10 months ago, I assumed that settling in would be as easy to do here as it is in the States. I was wrong; very wrong. It took us nine days to get a mobile phone, one month to get a landline, two months to get television service and three months for internet access.

At first I was puzzled. In the US, a convicted felon could get a cellphone in under an hour. Why, in a country this rich, is it so hard to get things done? And then I figured it out: While Brits have perfected the front end of capitalism – advertising and niche marketing – they have yet to work out the back end: customer service.

Take telecommunications. On the advice of friends, we went to Sky for our TV and internet needs. We must have had at least 10 glossy brochures from Sky in our first month here, showcasing their impressive array of sports, documentary and travel channels. They were also promoting a highly competitive broadband package, and the first six months were free. Not bad, eh?

But when my husband went to the Sky website to succumb to this aggressive campaign, it was difficult to tell where to sign up. And once he finally did enter our personal details, the screen inexplicably froze. When, after the fourth or fifth attempt, his information was finally recorded, he received an email message saying 'Thank you for your interest. A Sky representative will contact you within a few months.' Months??

Even when we did have the service installed, God forbid something wasn't working right. I can't tell you how many

times I found myself in a conversation with technical support that went like this:

Them: 'Good morning. How can I help you today?'

Me: 'My internet is slow. It's supposed to run at 16 megabytes per second, but it doesn't.'

Them: 'Let me check on that for you.' Five minute pause.

'Sorry, Madam, but I'm looking at your account and everything seems fine.'

Me: 'Yes, but it's taking ages just to open Google. Can you send someone out?'

Them: 'No, Madam, I'm afraid our engineers only install software.'

Me: 'OK, so who does your troubleshooting?'

Them: 'Well, that's what I'm doing. If you like, I can have our Level Three Department ring you, but that will take five working days.'

Needless to say, I never heard back from those mysterious Level Threes.

A similar problem arose with our television service – the picture was fuzzy despite repeated complaints. My husband and I finally got down on our hands and knees and fed a wire up through a hole in our floorboard. With American determination, if not technical savvy, we solved the problem ourselves.

And don't get me started on phones. Although we chose British Telecom for our basic landline service, the previous tenants had used a small private company called Bulldog. It took weeks of phone calls to get Bulldog to 'release' the line to BT. Then another few weeks passed before an engineer came out to verify that our house could, in fact, support a landline (something they presumably already knew). Only then did we get a phone number.

It doesn't help that nearly all customer service staff in England are Scottish. So in addition to your technical problems, you've got basic miscommunication going on. I once spent five minutes with a woman who kept telling me to check the 'eestri' file on my computer before I finally asked her to spell it. Turned out she was saying 'history'. Go figure.

The question, of course, is why the UK remains so resistant to customer service. Part of it is possibly just institutional catch-up. Britain only began to deregulate its economy in the 80s, so perhaps as sectors like telecoms get exposed to market pressures, proper customer service will flow out of competition. (Isn't that what Scotland's own Adam Smith promised all those years ago?)

It's also the case that the UK gives much more bargaining power to businesses than the US does. For example, it's easier to fix retail prices here. British consumers also have

fewer legal protections. Among other things, the loser in a lawsuit pays the winner's legal fees! Stronger labour unions must also be a factor. Perhaps workers aren't required to do things – like cater to customers – that aren't part of their job description. They're certainly less likely to be fired.

But culture matters, too. You think you could solve some of these problems by just screaming into the phone. I heard about one (undoubtedly rich) American who got so fed up with BT that he actually tracked down the CEO and threatened a lawsuit. An installer was at his house 25 minutes later.

But most of us aren't willing to go that far. And there really isn't much point in screaming anyway. Nobody else is. That whole 'mustn't grumble' stereotype really is true. Brits have resigned themselves to things working slowly, their upper lips as stiff as ever (not enough caffeine in the tea, I guess).

To be sure, things could be much worse. In other European countries, it might have taken four months to hook up our phone. And as an economist I know points out, America is the real exception on service provision; England is just closer to the mean.

Meanwhile, there are lots of upsides to living here. Cultural attractions are abundant; you never pay to see a doctor; public transport is terrific; and they have the cleanest public toilets around.

In the end, would I trade all of that for a satisfying six-minute exchange with the hyper-competent technical support staff at Verizon? Probably not. I just needed to complain.

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