The consumer experience of dealing with problems with communications services

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Research highlights

This qualitative research project investigated why some customers who had cause to contact their suppliers about a communications service issue did not do so, and explores the experiences of those customers who did contact their service providers. Sixty in-depth interviews, each lasting around 90 minutes, were conducted across the UK between 20 February and 3 April 2013.

Initial responses to problems

Problem Identification

The first step is for the customer to identify the problem and understand that it is the supplier's responsibility to deal with it. Most consumers were able to immediately identify the problem with their service, but in some cases the individual struggled to recognise the problem. This could be either because the problem was hidden – such as a telephone not receiving any inbound calls – or because the consumer lacked confidence in diagnosing the problem, worrying that it might be to do with them using a device incorrectly. Some participants also reported trouble distinguishing between issues with their service and problems with their own device used to access the service (e.g. laptop, handset etc).

Some people did not recognise what others would have considered to be a service problem, due to their low expectations of that service. For example, one person with intermittent broadband might consider that normal, whereas another in the same situation would consider this to be a significant issue. Expectations were often influenced by previous experiences with similar services, experiences of friends or family and media stories about providers.

Barriers to contact

Once a problem had been identified, most customers initially tried troubleshooting the problem themselves. Some issues, however, required contact with the supplier - such as complete outage of a vital service, or substantial problems with billing. Most consumers employed short-term coping mechanisms to deal with their problem, such as finding an alternative means of accessing the service (e.g. 3G rather than fixed broadband). In cases where coping mechanisms were relatively convenient and worked well, the coping mechanism could become a long-term response to an issue.

Other barriers to making contact included the perception that some types of problem cannot be resolved, such as issues with mobile phone reception or broadband speeds. In a few cases the problem itself impacted on the consumers' opportunity to make contact with their provider, either because their preferred contact channel was unusable or because the issue prevented them from being able to find the contact number.

Finally, expectations about the contact process and outcome strongly influenced consumer behaviour in some cases. Positive expectations about achieving a swift resolution would facilitate contact, but negative expectations about the difficulty of dealing with the issue, or pessimism about the likelihood of a satisfactory solution, could act as barriers. In some cases, anxiety about the cost of fixing the problem, or about temporary loss of service, stopped the individual from reporting the problem.

Drivers and triggers of contact

The decision about whether or not to contact a supplier was strongly influenced by the perceived severity of the issue. Recurrent problems, long-lasting problems and total outages were usually considered more serious than first-time or short-duration issues, or slight reductions in service quality. Perceived severity was also related to the consumer's level of reliance on the service, their previous service experience and their service expectations.

Emotional factors sometimes helped drive contact - such as anxiety about missing something important, like a business message or family news. In other cases, anger or a sense of injustice drove the contact.

In some instances the problem was severe enough for recognition of it to act as an immediate trigger to contact. In less urgent cases the trigger to make contact tended to involve an event that changed the individual's motivation, or a change in their environment such as having more time to deal with the issue.

The contact experience

Just as positive or negative past contact experiences could act as motivating factors in the decision to report a new issue, the initial contact experience concerning a problem could influence the consumer's subsequent journey. In most cases where the first contact was negative, however, the individual persisted with the issue, albeit with reduced motivation and often with increased procrastination.

Consumers reported varying expectations of the contact process, from very optimistic about the speed and ease of achieving resolution, to the polar opposite view. This was reflected in the consumers' experiences also, from very positive to very negative. Experiences that were especially strong, whether good or bad, tended to form a cognitive bias in the consumer - with their response to subsequent problems influenced by these earlier experiences.

Customers using the telephone to contact their providers had mixed experiences of getting through to someone who could help them, with some finding themselves being passed between call centre staff. In some cases a difficult initial experience influenced the subsequent contact behaviour, with consumers postponing further attempts to solve the problem, or seeking an alternative contact method.

Although most individuals were generally positive about the politeness and attitude of call centre staff, some were critical of a perceived lack of technical expertise of the call centre employees, with consumers saying some companies utilise generic troubleshooting scripts which are not fit for purpose. Many consumers reported communication problems between themselves and call centre staff, especially with operatives in foreign countries. Strong accents could cause difficulties for the customer if they could not understand the staff member, but could also lead to customers having to repeat themselves if they had a strong regional accent. These issues were sources of frustration for many participants, and sources of anger for some.

The majority of consumers default to contacting their suppliers by telephone. A minority prefer to speak to their supplier face-to-face, and will therefore visit a shop if it exists. Some reported using e-mail on occasion, since this method is free and provides an automatic record of the correspondence. Letters tended to be reserved for formal complaints and escalations of matters.

Why people give up

In a small number of cases, a frustrating initial contact with the supplier led to pessimism about whether the problem would be resolved and hence led to the decision to abandon the process.

Sometimes consumers gave up because they discovered that the service provider did not have responsibility for resolving the problem. Other consumers gave up after being told that a fix could result in temporary loss of a vital service, or that it could cost a relatively significant amount. For example, in some cases the consumer was led to understand that the cost of repair could not be confirmed until the problem had been diagnosed and fixed by a visiting engineer, which meant some went without a proper diagnosis of their issue for fear of having to pay.

In other cases the consumer concluded, after their initial investigation, that the time and effort required to resolve the issue were greater than it merited. Frustration at a protracted contact process can influence the decision to abandon the process, and in some cases stronger emotions provoked by the experience can cause someone to give up and act as future barriers to contact. Examples include unpleasant treatment by service providers' staff, particularly at in-home visits, and feelings of humiliation at being ignored.

After one or more failures to speak to the right person and resolve the issue, some felt they did not know what to do differently in order to meet with success and therefore would abandon their attempts to resolve the problem.

Resolution

Some problems were easily resolved via a single contact to the supplier, either because the problem was suited to general troubleshooting guidance, or because it was part of a

wider network problem that the supplier was addressing and which they could reassure the consumer about.

For more complex problems, the factor linking successful outcomes was that of reaching the right individual: this often needed to be someone with technical expertise who would take ownership of the issue. Finding this person was not always easy, since most call centre staff were found to have very limited capacity to help in non-standard cases. Some consumers were skilled at accessing an expert who could help, either through persuasion, threat of changing supplier, or simply via a direct telephone number that they had acquired in an earlier process. Others, however, had tried and failed to reach someone who could help.

A small number of consumers described using switching supplier as a way of resolving an issue they had been unable or unwilling to sort out with their current supplier. However, most consumers did not see this as a viable solution.

Escalation and compensation

Many participants had not considered escalating their issue, either with their service provider or with a third party. With third party escalation processes in particular, lack of knowledge was a significant barrier. In addition, some had low expectations of the efficacy of their supplier's formal complaints process following a negative customer service journey, which formed a strong barrier. Others simply did not want to expend any more energy on an issue that had already consumed much of their time. Another set of barriers to escalation concerned individuals' abilities to collect and present evidence of their problem and their subsequent interaction with their provider.

Where escalation did occur, strong emotions were often a motivating factor. In many cases a significant financial impact and the desire for compensation had driven the decision to escalate. A few participants described the process of formally reporting mistreatment by suppliers as a social duty, although it was unclear that this motivation was effective in itself.

The influence of personal characteristics

The research identified a number of demographic characteristics that influenced behaviour. Older consumers, typically those with less experience of technologies such as the internet, were more likely to have low service expectations. They were also more likely to feel anxious about reporting issues with technology, due to a perceived lack of understanding of technical terms which they felt they might need to be familiar with. As such, older consumers were more likely to rely on the advice of family and friends, although as previously mentioned the effect on their contact behaviours varied. Older people also tended to either care much less or much more about their communications services than younger people depending on how reliant they felt on the service. For example, in some cases they were less reliant on the internet than other participants,

using it infrequently for leisure only, and so were not highly motivated to report problems. However, in contrast many older people felt extremely reliant on their telephone - particularly those without family nearby - and would wish to address any phone problems urgently.

Consumers living in rural areas tended to have lower expectations of some services. In particular, mobile phone reception and broadband speeds were generally expected to be worse than those found in cities, and possibly also more susceptible to weather-related problems, so often went unreported.

Some consumers with disabilities faced physical barriers to contacting suppliers that other consumers did not experience. Hearing difficulties could make reporting an issue more challenging. Limitations of sight or mobility could affect the individual's ability to diagnose a problem or conduct diagnostic checks such as re-setting a router or reading a password from a router. As such, some disabled consumers had a particularly strong contact mode preference, such as face to face. Due to the extra effort required by some disabled customers to deal with the contact process, stronger motivation to make contact is sometimes required.

Finally, the cost of contacting a supplier and the potential call-out costs for engineers if the problem was diagnosed as your responsibility (e.g. the phone wiring in your house was at fault) can act as barriers to contact and reasons for giving up, particularly for consumers with low incomes.

Pre-existing drivers and barriers to contact

Analysis identified a number of pre-existing factors that influenced whether consumers chose to contact their supplier about a problem:

Past experience: One of the most important was the consumer's past experiences of contact processes. A positive experience reporting an issue to a supplier made the consumer more motivated to do so again in future, while a negative experience could act as a barrier.

Perceptions of supplier: Consumers' perceptions of their suppliers acted as a strong motivating factor in the decision about whether or not to make contact. Generally, consumers were more likely to contact suppliers they had good opinions of, since they expected a good response; conversely, motivations were lower in respect of suppliers that they thought badly of.

Personality: In some cases the way the consumer thought of themselves could motivate their contact behaviour: individuals who thought of themselves as someone who 'fights for their rights', were more likely to pursue an issue, whereas some did not like to think of themselves as 'complainers', and hence tended not to report less serious issues.

Skills: Consumers who possessed strong communication and interpersonal skills tended to be more confident in their ability to solve an issue, especially when their professional role involved tasks similar to those required in the contact process. Conversely, some who felt they lacked such skills were less likely to report issues.

Friends and Family: Some consumers relied on their social networks (offline and online) for help with communications problems. This influenced their contact behaviours, albeit in non-uniform ways depending on whether family and friends advised them to contact or not contact their suppliers.

Introduction

Introduction

Objectives

The principal objectives of the research were to understand why some customers who had cause to contact their suppliers about a communications service issue did not do so, and to explore the experiences of those customers who did contact their service providers.

In particular, the research explored:

- The issues that cause disgruntlement/concern (both current and past), the problems people do and do not contact suppliers about and the drivers of this behaviour
- The extent of consumer tolerance to service issues (consumers' experience of faults and unsatisfactory goods/services – and particularly fault-handling and the journey they experience before they actually make a formal complaint)
- The problem resolution journey:
    - Amount of contact and ease of process
    - Why and when do people give up on an unresolved problem
    - Benefits of contacting the supplier about a problem – did the outcome justify the effort?
- What triggers people to contact a supplier about a problem
- The barriers to contacting suppliers about a problem
- Whether and which specific factors contribute to people from different demographic groups choosing not to contact suppliers about problems

Problems and Complaints - terminology

The Communications Consumer Panel sought to understand in greater depth this population of service users who chose not to complain about a service even though they thought they had cause to. There was a desire to understand if some consumers were not contacting their suppliers about problems at all and the reasons for this, or whether they were but did not consider this to be a complaint. Consequently, the materials were designed to ask people about 'contacting suppliers about problems with communications services', rather than 'making complaints' to see where the word 'complaint' was used spontaneously by consumers.

Many consumers label the process of contacting their supplier about a problem as complaining, although some thought of this only as contact. Irrespective of this, however, most distinguished clearly between reporting a problem and making a formal complaint – although some were less aware of the processes for making a formal complaint as discussed in Chapter 6.

Methodology

A qualitative approach was considered most appropriate to meet the objectives of the research, as an in-depth understanding of consumers' reasoning and experiences was

required. Sixty in-depth interviews, each lasting around 90 minutes in length, were conducted across the UK between 20 February and 3 April 2013.

To ensure the research included different responses of consumers to service issues, quotas were set based on the type of contact about problems consumers had had with their suppliers, including:

- Consumers who had not contacted their suppliers about problems;
- Consumers who had contacted their suppliers but had either given up before getting the problem resolved or were still trying to get it resolved; and
- Consumers who had contacted their suppliers about problems and got them resolved.

For more information please see Appendix 1: Detailed Methodology.

Behavioural analysis

Given the primary objectives of the research were to understand the drivers of and barriers to certain types of behaviour in relation to problems with communications services, robust behavioural analysis was required. Data collection and analysis was therefore structured around the COM-B model of behaviour change.[1] For more details about why this model was selected and how it was applied, please see Appendix 2.

Customer journey analysis

This report is structured around the different journeys consumers experience when they have problems with communications services. Combined with behavioural analysis, customer journey analysis enables us to explore in detail the path consumers take when trying to resolve problems, and to understand why they take a particular path.

All consumers follow the same initial pathway. First, they need to identify that they have a problem with their service. Then they often try to resolve or diagnose the problem themselves, although some will contact their suppliers immediately. Whilst they are experiencing the problem, consumers often adopt coping mechanisms, such as changing the way they use the service or utilising substitute services.

For some consumers who choose not to contact their suppliers about the problem, these coping mechanisms become permanent. Other consumers may find that their problem eventually resolves itself.

Other consumers contact their suppliers either immediately upon discovering the problem, when they realise they cannot fix it themselves, or following another trigger. They may resolve their problem the first time they contact their supplier, or they may have to contact them multiple times. Some consumers abandon the process and never get their problem resolved, while others persist until they do. Finally, some escalate their complaints and/or seek some form of compensation while others do not.

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[1] Michie, van Stralen and West (2011) The behaviour change wheel: A new method for characterising and designing behaviour change interventions, in *Implementation Science* 6: 42.

The figure below illustrates these journeys.

Figure 1: Consumer contact journeys
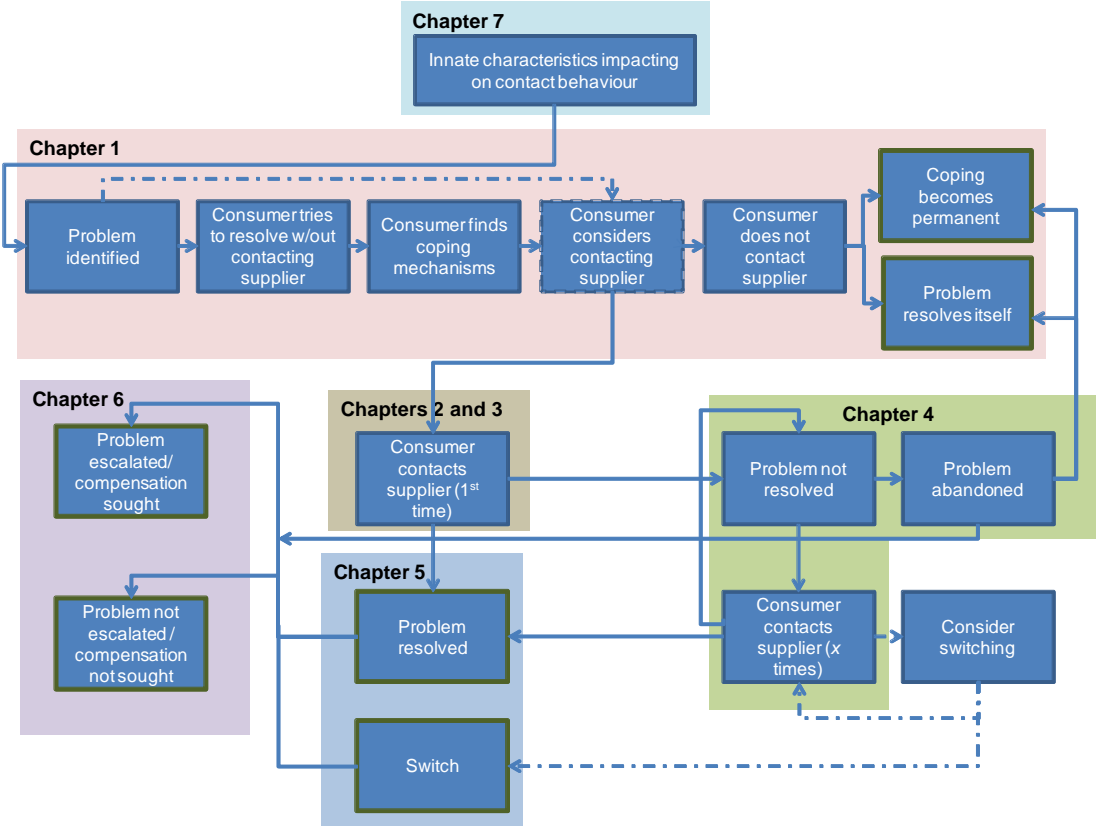
This figure will be replicated throughout the report, highlighting the stages of the journey relevant to each section.

Case study illustrations

To bring the customer journey to life, we have included a number of case studies based on real experiences of consumers. Please note that names have been changed to protect participants' anonymity; all other details, including demographic characteristics, are unchanged.

1. Why people don't make contact

Chapter 7
Innate characteristics impacting on contact behaviour

Chapter 1

Problem identified	Consumer tries to resolve w/out contacting supplier	Consumer finds coping mechanisms	Consumer considers contacting supplier	Consumer does not contact supplier	Coping becomes permanent
					Problem resolves itself

Chapter 6
Problem escalated/ compensation sought

Problem not escalated / compensation not sought

Chapters 2 & 3
Consumer contacts supplier (1st time)

Chapter 4
Problem not resolved — Problem abandoned

Consumer contacts supplier (x times) — Consider switching

Chapter 5
Problem resolved

Switch
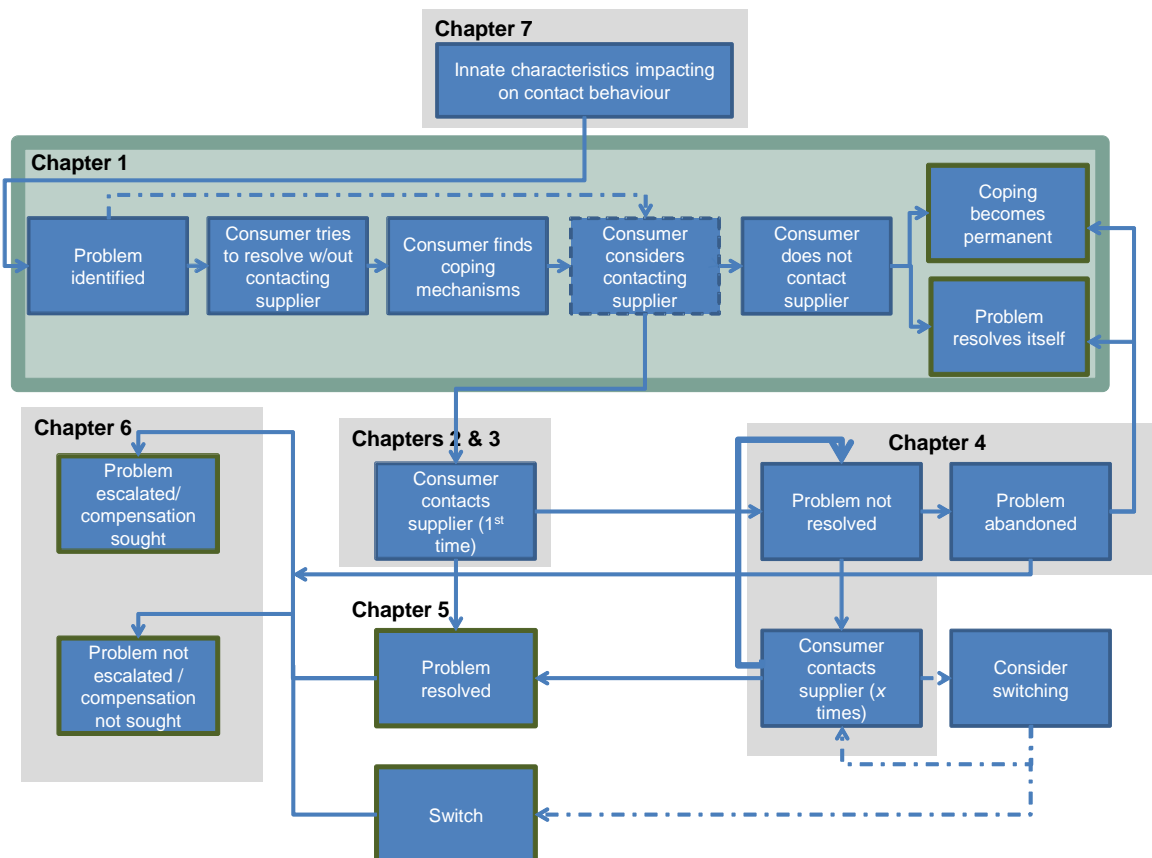
1. Why people don't make contact

This section explores the first stages of the customer journey from the identification of a problem with a communications service to the initial responses to the problem and coping mechanisms. It details the barriers to contact that consumers face in this initial phase of the journey.

The research was designed so that half of the participants were recruited on the basis that they had experienced problems they perceived to be at least 'quite severe' but had not contacted their supplier. Some of these would be unlikely to ever contact their supplier (often due to pre-existing factors, as outlined in section 7), while for others it would depend on the issue.

Summary

Consumers faced a range of different barriers to contacting suppliers about problems with communications services, some of which would result in the decision not to contact a supplier, even if the problem was perceived to be relatively severe.

Barriers that arose when trying to identify problems with communications services included: a lack of understanding of the problem; uncertainty about service quality entitlement; low expectations of service quality; anxiety about calling due to concerns about personal ability to either explain the problem well or to understand technical language; uncertainty about who to contact about the problem; and uncertainty about where to find a number to call. In general, consumers who were less knowledgeable about the technology were less likely to identify and report a problem, especially older consumers using newer technologies, such as broadband or mobile.

When responding to problems, consumers who felt more reliant on advice from family and friends, and who were told by these that the problem was a user error or a problem with the device rather than the service, were less likely to contact their suppliers.

Other barriers to contacting suppliers about problems included a low level of reliance on the service in question, the problem being a first-time issue, and the ability to form relatively convenient coping mechanisms. Some consumers were reluctant to call due to their fear of a period where they would experience a complete loss of the service.

Consumers also faced several barriers as a result of their expectations about the outcome of the contact or about the contact process itself, which often led to procrastination or ultimate failure to act. These barriers included pessimism about the end result, negative expectations about the process, expectations of having to pay to have the problem fixed, and expectations about the cost of calling. Negative emotions were often attached to perceptions of the contact centre experience in particular.

Some consumers were put off making contact due to fears about the cost of doing so. The issue of charging for calls made from mobiles was particularly problematic when landlines, from which calls could be made for free, were not working properly. Another anxiety for some was the belief that the supplier will charge to fix the problem.

Identifying problems

Most consumers could tell immediately if there was a problem with their service

Problems were usually identified when consumers tried to use services or while they were using services. For example, a few consumers turned on their television and discovered that channels were freezing, while several were using their broadband when it suddenly stopped working. Others had received an unexpected bill and realised relatively quickly that the billing was not what they expected.

However, some consumers struggled to identify whether or not they had a problem

Not all consumers were able to easily identify whether or not they had a problem. In some cases this was due to the nature of the problem itself: for example, one consumer was unaware for a period of time that her landline telephone was not receiving incoming calls.

In other cases, a disability contributed to the uncertainty.

> *When she rang me it was like as if it was muffled, indistinct [...] but because I'm deaf I'm never sure whether it's my hearing aid which needs sorting out or whether there is a problem on the phone itself.*
> *Female, 65+, Wales*

Other consumers were aware that something was not right, but were unsure what exactly the problem was. In particular, a number of less technologically-savvy consumers, often older, expressed concern that the problem might be related to something they were doing wrong, rather than a problem with the service.

Service expectations could impact on ability to identify a problem

Some consumers, often older and/or living in rural areas, were unsure of the level of service quality they could expect. Some were disappointed with their service but uncertain if there was a problem. Others may not have been aware that the service they were receiving was less good than others would expect. For example, some thought that it was normal for broadband to be slow or to cut out every once in a while, or for mobile reception to be poor in some areas, so did not think these issues were cause for complaint.

Some consumers who had chosen a supplier offering a very cheap deal sometimes had lower expectations of the service, such as the quality of mobile phone reception or speed of broadband. They felt that they were 'getting what they paid for,' so even if the service was not always what they hoped for, they did not feel they could complain.

> *With my package, 'cause that package is like £7 a month, you can't complain.*
> *Female, 35-64, north England*

Some had difficulties distinguishing between a service issue and a hardware problem

Some consumers had trouble identifying whether a problem lay in the device being used or in the service provided. In one case a consumer thought her computer was to blame for the broadband freezing, when it was in fact the router provided by her service provider which was faulty.

> *[My broadband] had been freezing quite a bit, but I just put it down to the fact that [my computer] was old... [but] when I spoke to the engineer he said that is because of [a problem with the router].*
> *Female, 65+, south England*

Being unsure exactly where a problem lay also led some consumers to be unsure who to contact about a problem. One consumer who had bought a smartphone from one company, but had a contract with another, had been in touch with both companies numerous times to try to resolve problems with his reception but was still uncertain if the problem was with the phone or the service.

Again, consumers unsure of the cause of the problem often relied on family or friends to diagnose the issue. If members of their social networks advised that the problem was with the device, consumers were less likely to contact their suppliers.

Initial responses to identified problems

Some problems require immediate contact with the supplier

For certain types of problems, such as an unexpectedly high bill or an intermittent but recurring problem, it was immediately clear that consumers would need to contact their supplier to resolve the problem. In some of these cases the consumer called their supplier quite quickly after realising he or she had a problem.

Most try to troubleshoot the problem themselves first

However, most consumers would contact their supplier about problems only if they could not resolve the problem themselves or with help. For problems affecting the services themselves, once consumers identified that they had a problem the more technologically-savvy often did some simple trouble-shooting themselves to try to resolve it - such as checking plug connections or re-booting the device.

Many consumers talked about checking whether there was an area-wide problem or an issue specific to their home, or doing an internet search to look for ways of resolving the problem (often leading to forums where people had posted about similar issues).

> *Now we did have problems with (TV provider) over the weekend because of the snow, so the first thing I did was actually looked on (TV provider), on the internet to find out. And then I found from googling it, that basically if there's heavy snow in the area, (TV provider) can cut off.*
> *Male, 35-64, Northern Ireland*

Those who were not comfortable trouble-shooting themselves, particularly older consumers, often relied on friends or family to help them trouble-shoot or to try to resolve the problem for them.

> *My son said [...] shut everything down, wait a minute or two, turn it on again and restart the whole operation. And usually I find that fixes it.*
> *Male, 65+, Northern Ireland*

The problem itself can impact whether consumers can find out how to make contact

In a few cases people were unsure how to find out a number to call – in particular this would occur when broadband was not working (so they couldn't find the answer online) or where it was a problem with a mobile. For example, one person knew you could dial 150 from the mobile but the problem was with mobile reception and they did not know how else to get in touch.

Coping with problems

Most employ short-term coping mechanisms

Most consumers found a way of coping with the problem with their service, at least as a short-term solution. Common coping mechanisms included waiting for the service to start working again (for short-term, intermittent problems), replacing one service with another (for example, using 3G instead of wireless broadband), using the service in a different location (such as making mobile phone calls in the garden), and adjusting service use in some way (for example watching different television channels).

Convenient coping mechanisms can become long-term responses

Where the service was not considered critical to the consumer or if such coping mechanisms were perceived to be not too inconvenient, they sometimes became the long-term solutions to the problem.

As such, a relatively convenient coping mechanism can often act as a barrier to contacting suppliers about problems, particularly when the consumer does not feel very reliant on the service.

> *If it's my car, then I'll get it fixed straight away... TV, I like TV, but I'll only miss it more at the weekend.*
> *Male, 35-64, south England*

In a few instances, consumers believed they would have to pay to get the problem resolved and were sometimes less likely to get in touch with their suppliers and more likely to try to find coping mechanisms as a result. An example of this is included in the case study box below.

Case study: Jared[2] – Did not contact supplier due to service not being considered too important, lack of time and potential cost of fix

Jared is self-employed, working in the car sales business. He has been a subscriber of the same pay television service for the last six years and is generally satisfied with the service he receives. Jared watches about two hours of television per day, but when he is busy this decreases dramatically.

Recently Jared experienced problems with his television channels freezing and not receiving any satellite signal. The problem meant that he was unable to watch programmes on certain channels, and lasted five days.

Jared never contacted his supplier about the problem – and there were a number of reasons for this. He says the main reason is because he was too busy, and the service was not very important to him during that particular period because he did not have much time to watch it. In addition, some of the channels worked, so he was able to watch television, but just not necessarily the channels he would have ideally chosen.

"I would contact [supplier] if I thought the problem was excessive or properly interfering with my life."

Jared also knew a little bit about how to trouble-shoot the problem; he said he knew he should check the connections as a starting point. He says that if he called the supplier, they would ask him to go through those steps first, so partly he had not called because he had not done his own trouble-shooting yet.

"I hadn't taken it all apart yet either, 'cos I could've had a look at all of that, and had a little fiddle around."

Jared also suspected that the satellite dish might have moved in recent bad weather. He thought that to fix this would have involved an engineer visit, which he thought would have cost about £70.

"It's like £70 for them just to come round if you're out of your original one-year contract and in the rolling period."

Jared describes himself as a laid-back person, and generally prefers to wait to see if a problem will fix itself. This is partly because although he believed the staff would be polite and would resolve the problem, he thought the process would be a bit long-winded (both the amount of time he would have to spend on the phone and the length of time it would take to fix the problem). A more minor concern was the cost of making the phone calls.

"That's probably why I didn't ring as well, 'cos I was just like, 'Sit on the customer service, sit there for ages, wait for the thing'... It's like 'I'll do

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[2] Case study based on the real experiences of a participant, whose name has been changed to protect anonymity.

> *that tomorrow'. You put it off because you think it's going to be long-winded."*

After five days he was just getting to the point that he thought he might have to contact his supplier, when the problem resolved itself.

> *"I got to the point of thinking 'Right, I might have to ring them tomorrow, it's still going on, the weather's better now'... Then it just started working."*

Expectations of the outcome of contact and the contact process

For those consumers who had considered contacting their suppliers about problems, their expectations about the process and/or the outcome sometimes acted as barriers to contact. Expectations about the outcome were generally influenced by a number of factors.

Common perception that some types of problem cannot be resolved

For example, it was common for consumers to believe that suppliers were not able to resolve certain types of problems, such as poor mobile phone reception and poor television reception in bad weather, and that contacting them would therefore not lead to a satisfactory solution. Additionally, some consumers who had previously been unable to resolve a problem or who had friends or family who had given up trying to resolve a particular issue were also influenced by these experiences.

> *My mobile is unfixable, according to me. The only way I can fix it is to change network.*
> *Male, 35-64, south England*

Living in a rural area can influence decision to contact

Rural consumers tended to have lower expectations of services and be more inclined to believe their supplier could not make their service any better, and therefore were more likely to put up with problems and not to contact their suppliers (this is explored further in section 7).

Expectations often influenced by previous experience and media stories

Expectations about the process were often informed by previous contact experiences with suppliers and stories about contact from social networks. In many cases, previous contact experiences with the supplier of the service were the main influence on expectations, although in some cases consumers extrapolated from their experience of other communications suppliers. Experiences of customer service in other sectors was generally not a large influence, although may have played a role in informing the low expectations of a small number of consumers who were very pessimistic about the process but did not link this to a particular example.
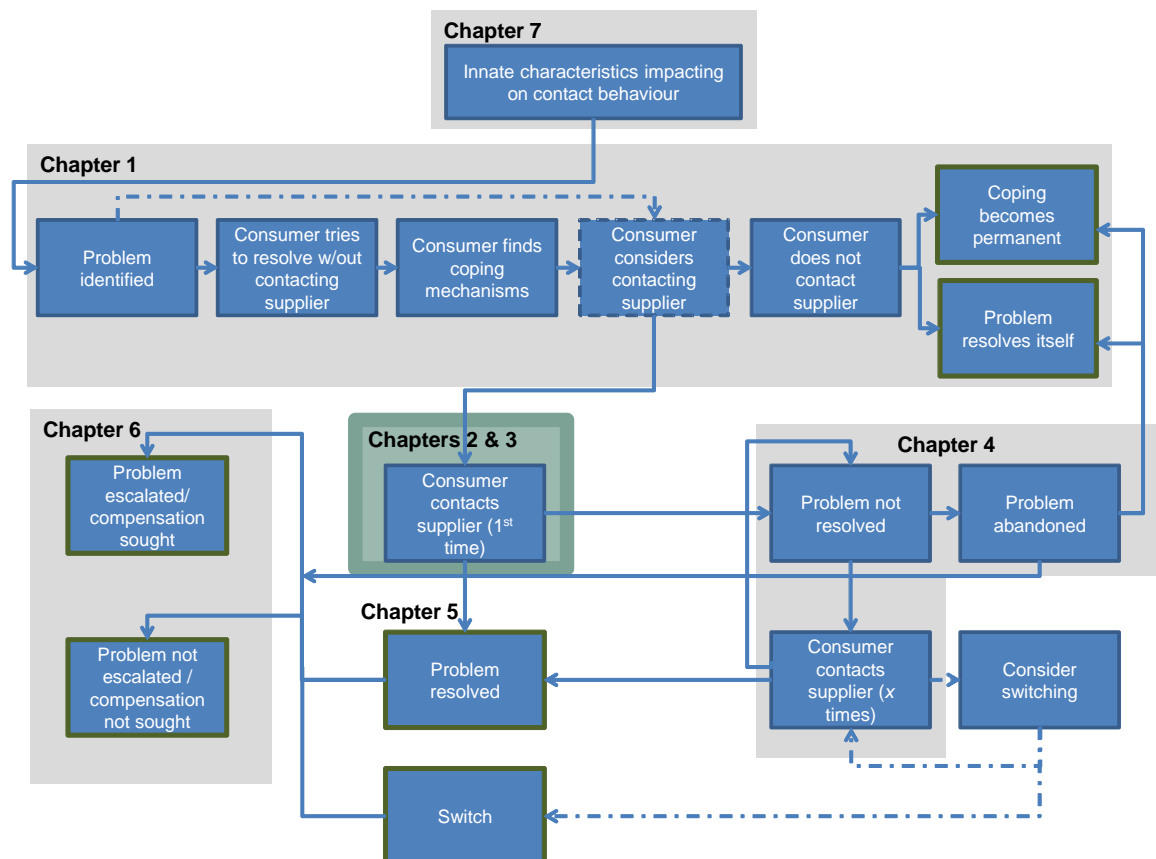
My expectations would be it would be difficult to talk to somebody.
Male, 65+, Northern Ireland

Media reports were another influence, particularly in the case of suppliers who had had bad press about the quality of the service they provided or their customer service. One consumer, for example, said he was "not full of great expectations" when he called his provider because he had read reports stating that they were generally not a good provider.

Negative expectations not usually the sole reason for lack of contact

In most cases, negative expectations of the process were not the sole barrier to contact but acted in conjunction with other barriers. For example, one consumer had negative expectations of the process which led him to procrastinate about getting in touch with his supplier, but the main reason for not contacting was that he felt the inconvenience was relatively minor. However, negative expectations of the process could be the sole barrier in the case of consumers on low incomes who expected that as part of the process they would need to be on the phone for a long time, did not have access to a free phone number, and therefore anticipated an expensive mobile phone bill. This is discussed further in section 7.

2. Why people do make contact

Chapter 7
Innate characteristics impacting on contact behaviour

Chapter 1
- Problem identified
- Consumer tries to resolve w/out contacting supplier
- Consumer finds coping mechanisms
- Consumer considers contacting supplier
- Consumer does not contact supplier
- Coping becomes permanent
- Problem resolves itself

Chapter 6
- Problem escalated/ compensation sought
- Problem not escalated / compensation not sought

Chapters 2 & 3
- Consumer contacts supplier (1st time)

Chapter 4
- Problem not resolved
- Problem abandoned

Chapter 5
- Problem resolved
- Consumer contacts supplier (x times)
- Consider switching
- Switch

2. Why people do make contact

This section explores *what* makes consumers contact their suppliers about problems with communications services (the drivers) and why consumers decide to contact their suppliers *when* they do (the triggers). There is naturally some overlap between drivers and triggers; however, in many cases drivers could be present, but something else needed to occur before consumers contacted their suppliers.

Summary

Consumers generally decided to contact their suppliers about problems with communications services for a combination of reasons. Not every driver had to be present in order for a consumer to have contacted his or her supplier. The combinations of drivers varied, and consumers attached different levels of importance to each of the drivers. However, there were common themes across a number of consumers. For most consumers, the most important drivers were the perceived severity of the problem and the belief that the supplier could resolve it.

Other key drivers of contact included positive expectations of the contact process, anxiety that something important could be missed, anger from upsetting consequences of the problem, a feeling of injustice, knowledge of the problem and who to contact, good cognitive and interpersonal skills and advice from family and friends to contact the supplier.

'Triggers' refer to those factors that cause consumers to contact their suppliers at a particular moment in time. Unlike drivers and barriers, which influence *whether or not* consumers contact their suppliers, triggers determine the *timing* of the contact.

Key triggers included the perceived severity of the problem, anger as a result of missing something important, bill shock, advice or pressure to contact, a lack of alternative avenues of action, discovering that the problem is not widespread, finding a convenient time to contact (such as a school holiday) and contacting the provider about another issue.

Drivers of contact

Severity of the problem was a very important driver for many

For many consumers, the decision to make contact was driven by the perceived severity of the problem. Perceptions of severity were informed by:

- the seriousness of the problem itself;
- consumers' expectations of the service; and
- their perceptions of their reliance on the service.

In terms of the seriousness of the problem, consumers reacted differently depending on whether they had experienced a total loss of a service or a fault that had only hampered their use of the service, reducing the service quality. For example, consumers who experienced problems with the programme information on their televisions were less likely to contact their suppliers than those who were unable to view channels they had paid for. The duration of the problem was also a factor: problems lasting a long time or recurring frequently were generally considered more serious than those that resolve themselves quickly or occur only rarely.

Service expectations impacted on how the problem was perceived

Consumers' service expectations were formed based on reasons for choosing a supplier, previous experience of the service, and where consumers lived. Consumers who had chosen a supplier based on its reputation for good service tended to think problems were more severe than those whose principal reason for choosing a brand was that it offered good value for money. As noted above, those who thought their packages were cheap sometimes had lower expectations of their services.

> *Everyone knows [this provider has] got poor network coverage, but it was a really good deal so I went with it. So I guess I'm getting what I paid for.*
> *Male, 35-64, South England*

Previous experience of the service, for example with another supplier, also impacted on expectations and consequently how the problem was perceived. This was particularly noticeable among the older consumer population in relation to broadband; some older people new to broadband thought it was normal for the service to cut out every so often, while consumers with more experience of using broadband had higher expectations of the service.

Perceived severity often related to reliance on the service

Consumers felt varying degrees of reliance on services. This was partly related to how they used the service, with consumers using services very frequently or for business purposes more likely to see problems as severe, compared with those who used the services less often or for leisure. Consumers who needed to be able to be in contact with family members, care wardens or friends at all times, even if they did not actually use the service very often, were also more likely to feel reliant on services. Because these consumers felt they needed to know that the service was working at all times, just in case they needed to use it, they were more likely to perceive any problem with the service as severe.

> *The loss of the mobile phone [...] because I've got quite an old car [...] I've always got this thing if you have a breakdown, I can always lift the phone and ring my son. But whenever I had no network coverage I have this problem if I breakdown.*
> *Male, 65+, Northern Ireland*

Consumers had varying expectations of the contact process

As discussed in the section on barriers to contact, consumers had varying expectations about what the process of contacting their suppliers would be like and whether or not suppliers would be able to resolve their problems. Some consumers had very positive opinions of their suppliers and believed they would be helpful, or thought the problem they were having would be relatively quick to fix. A few mentioned that the call centre menu was quite short and easy to understand and their suppliers usually picked up fairly quickly. Moreover, just as some consumers had negative expectations of their suppliers' ability to solve problems, others had had very good experiences in the past that led them to believe they would be able to resolve the issue to their satisfaction.

In many cases anxiety about missing something important was a key driver

Anxiety about missing something important, such as an emergency phone call from a family member, or something with financial value such as a good deal online, due to a problem with a service was an important driver of contact. One consumer, who used his mobile phone for business purposes and had problems with reception in his home, described his anxiety that he might miss calls from potential customers and therefore lose the opportunity to sell a product. He did not know whether this had happened before, but he was very anxious that it might have and could again. Similarly, missing calls from children who needed collecting from school or elderly parents taken into hospital was a concern for some. In certain cases this was the most important driver of contact.

> *[If my phone does not have reception] you might lose a customer.*
> *Male, 35-64, south England*

Emotional factors such as anger or a sense of injustice can drive contact

Problems with communications services can have impacts ranging from minor inconveniences to financial consequences to emotionally-upsetting consequences. Anger as a result of emotional upset can be an important driver of contact with suppliers, as was the case with one consumer who did not receive a number of picture messages from her mother and found this very upsetting.

Some consumers are driven to contact their suppliers by a feeling of injustice. These consumers may have a stronger innate sense of fairness, and are often very conscious that they are paying for services and they would like them to work perfectly all the time. Others might have suffered some financial loss as a result of the problem.

> *I feel that if you're paying for something, then you should get the service that they promise you; so perhaps it's a monetary thing; you know if I'm paying for something I have an expectation and if it's not up to standard then I'll maybe challenge it.*
> *Female, 35-64, Scotland*

Ability to diagnose and communicate the problem was an important facilitator

Understanding the problem and who to contact about it, and having strong cognitive and interpersonal skills, are important facilitators of contact. As facilitators, these factors are

generally not sufficient on their own to make most people contact their suppliers, but consumers who possess them in combination with key drivers are more likely to contact their suppliers than those who do not.

Consumers who felt that they had been able to identify the problem – or were at least fairly certain the problem was with the service – faced one less barrier when they were thinking about contacting their suppliers. Similarly, those who were unsure what the problem was but were more technologically-savvy and felt able to explain what they were encountering and understand the explanations of call centre staff were also in a better position if they chose to contact their suppliers.

Moreover, consumers who were confident in their ability to advocate for themselves and 'play the call centre game' found it easier to contact their suppliers about problems. This is discussed further in section 3.

> *[Because of my work] I'm used to doing it [playing suppliers off each other to get the best deal], so it's not like I'm a normal customer if you like; I'm in that kind of situation often.*
> Male, 65+, north England

Social networks can be important when deciding whether to contact

Finally, those consumers whose social networks were generally supportive of contact were more likely to contact their suppliers. Although one consumer who had contacted her supplier described herself as different from her family and friends who did not like to 'make a fuss', for many consumers social advice about whether or not they should call their suppliers was important.

Below is an example of a participant who was driven to contact their supplier.

Case study: Olivia[3] – Has strong interpersonal skills and contacted supplier due to feeling of injustice and belief they could resolve problem

Olivia lives at home with her husband and son. She is a senior administrative officer in a school where she has worked part-time for eight years.

Olivia describes herself as having good interpersonal skills and being well-organised:

"I'm quite an articulate person and I like to provide a good service in my work and I like to follow things through and if I say that I'll do something, I do do it. So I think I expect maybe the same; you know, me to be treated the same, and if it doesn't happen then I've no hesitation in saying to people that I'm not happy and I'm paying for this and you're not delivering."

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[3] Case study based on the real experiences of a participant, whose name has been changed to protect anonymity.

This work was carried out in accordance with the requirements of the international quality standard for Market Research,

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"I write [the details of contacts with the supplier] down on the bill and mostly I always try and get who I've spoken to and the date that I have phoned."

Olivia has a mobile phone on a rolling contract which she pays by direct debit and receives her bills online. She heard about a new deal her supplier was offering which cost £5 per month instead of the £10 she was paying at the time. When she rang to ask if the offer was available to her, the supplier offered her a new smartphone for £14 per month. The supplier said she would be able to return it within four weeks if she was not happy with it, so she decided to try it.

After two weeks with the smartphone, she could not get the hang of it, so she decided to return it. When she called the supplier to check that they had received it, she also confirmed with the supplier that the charge would revert to the £5 per month deal.

However, the following month when Olivia checked her bank statements, she saw that she had been charged £14 for the smartphone, and in addition, was charged for each minute of calls and each text made from the old phone that she had reverted to using once she returned the smartphone. The total charges were about £50 when she had been expecting only £5.

Confident that her supplier would resolve her problem, Olivia called her supplier:

"Because they had taken money from my bank account that they weren't entitled to take."

Olivia has been with her supplier for many years, so she knows the 3-digit number to use to get in touch with them. As her mobile phone supplier also provides her landline service, calls to this number from her landline are free.

Although Olivia got frustrated with the menus and particularly with having to wait on hold – she even hung up a couple of times while trying to get through – she persevered. The person she spoke to was "nice and apologetic" and said that the charges for the smartphone would be refunded, along with all but £5 for the other phone.

"[I thought] 'Great, that's good'; I was quite happy with what they told me."

However, the following month, Olivia was still being billed too much and none of the charges from the previous month had been refunded. She rang again, and the call centre again apologised, said they were not sure what had happened, and that the money would be refunded to her account within 14 days.

"[I felt] angry and [that they were] incompetent and [I was thinking] 'Here I go again, I have to phone this call centre again'."

"It was on the notes and they were apologetic and they didn't know what had happened, what had fallen down at the other end."

When Olivia checked her account 15 days later, the money from both months had been refunded. Her supplier never contacted her to confirm the money was in her account, which Olivia thought would have been nice.

"[I thought] 'Thank goodness, I don't have to go through all that again'; I was pleased that they'd done what they said they would."

Triggers to contacting suppliers about problems

Consumers who had problems with communications services did not all choose to contact their suppliers as soon as they became aware of the problem. Consumers' perceptions of the severity of a problem, in addition to certain motivations and opportunities, were the main factors driving decisions about when to contact suppliers. Because of this, consumers experiencing the same problems with their services often reacted differently in how they dealt with the issue.

Severity of a problem can be a trigger

Encountering a severe problem is discussed in detail as a driver of contact, but it can also act as a trigger for contact. In many cases, consumers who discovered problems they felt were severe and could not resolve themselves called their suppliers as soon as they identified the problem.

> *It was just case of I need to phone them they've overcharged me.*
> *Female, 35-64, Scotland*

Contact can be triggered by an event that changes the consumer's motivation

Some consumers who did not perceive their problems as very severe and therefore did not contact their suppliers immediately upon discovering a problem with a service, responded to triggers that occurred after to the discovery of the fault. These triggers can be loosely classified in terms of changes to the consumers' motivations and changes to their external environment.

Factors that can change consumers' motivations include:

- The problem becoming more severe.

- The problem eventually resulting in an emotional impact on the consumer, such as missing a favourite television programme or an important phone call.

- The consumer discovering that someone else has a cheaper or better service.

- The consumer discovering that the problem he or she is experiencing is not widespread.

- An upcoming change in the level of customer service the consumer can obtain, such as a warranty that is about to expire.

- The consumer having taken all the steps he or she can to resolve the problem, and the only remaining option to resolve the problem is to contact the supplier.
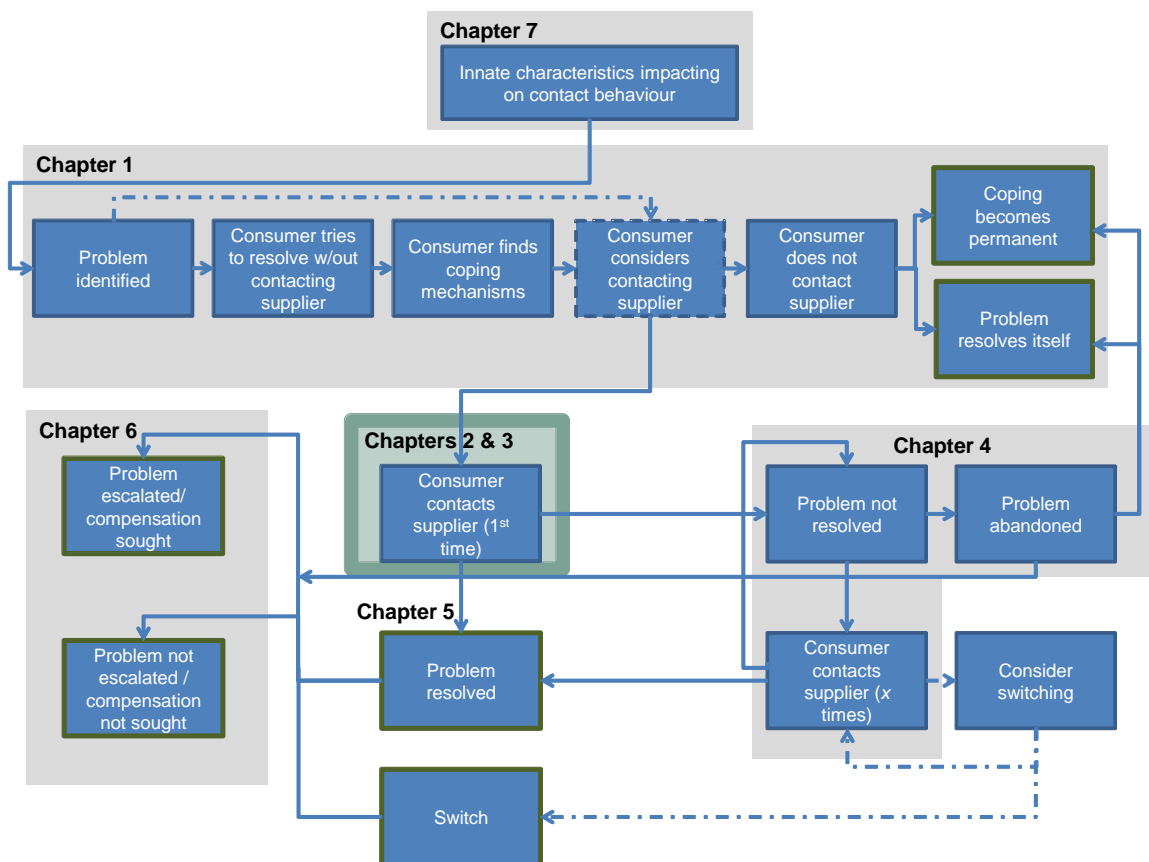
I went there just before December... because I think, you know, with all phones, you get a 1 year's warranty so I know my warranty's running out
Male, 35-64, London

Changes to the consumer's environment can also act as a trigger

Consumers can also be influenced by their social environment. Some consumers described partners or children pestering them to get problems resolved, while others said that they had been advised to contact their suppliers by family, friends or even an engineer. For example, one consumer had an engineer come to her home to set up a new personal video recorder (PVR) box and told her that she should request a new router from her supplier to solve the problems she was having with her broadband which she happened to mention in passing.

Finally, the physical opportunities facing a consumer may impact on the timing of contact. Consumers having more time during the holidays, or needing to get in touch with their suppliers about another matter, may act as triggers.

3. The contact experience

Chapter 7
Innate characteristics impacting on contact behaviour

Chapter 1
Problem identified → Consumer tries to resolve w/out contacting supplier → Consumer finds coping mechanisms → Consumer considers contacting supplier → Consumer does not contact supplier → Coping becomes permanent / Problem resolves itself

Chapter 6
Problem escalated/ compensation sought
Problem not escalated / compensation not sought

Chapters 2 & 3
Consumer contacts supplier (1st time)

Chapter 4
Problem not resolved → Problem abandoned

Chapter 5
Problem resolved
Switch
Consumer contacts supplier (x times) → Consider switching

3. The contact experience

This section explores the consumer experience of interacting with suppliers about problems with communications services. Telephone is the default mode of contact for most people and therefore the focus of most of this section is on the call centre experience.

Summary

Some consumers reported poor customer service experiences. Aside from issues with the cost of contact, most dissatisfaction had to do with the dialogue with the customer service assistant. Recurring problems included difficulty understanding and communicating with staff in call centres located overseas. Some consumers also complained about the lack of technical expertise of staff which in some cases led to their inability to resolve problems. Another frustration was a need in many cases to repeat the description of the problem and the previous contact history at the beginning of each call. Many customers, however, described their customer service experiences as 'fine.'

Many consumers experiencing poor customer service persisted in trying to get their problem resolved, though often with modified behaviours, but in a few cases this did lead to consumers abandoning their efforts at resolution.

The call centre experience was not usually a factor that would itself drive contact or abandonment, except in extreme cases - but it was certainly a contributing factor in these behaviours. It should also be noted that the contact experience, along with the wider reputation of a provider's customer service offering, did impact on consumer expectations of the process, and thus indirectly impacted on the general likelihood to make contact in any particular case.

Mode of contact

Telephone is the automatic choice for the majority

Most consumers did not think through options for contacting their supplier, but rather automatically picked up the telephone once they decided to contact. The main benefit of phoning was that consumers could get an immediate response from their supplier and preferably a solution to their problem, possibly through technical trouble-shooting provided over the phone.

> *Immediate things that need attention I will phone, and then later on if I'm not happy with the service then I will maybe send an email or a letter.*
> *Female, 35-64, Scotland*

Some consumers said that phoning was more convenient because they could do it quite quickly – it did not require popping out to the shops or sitting down to compose a letter. Many suppliers of communications services provide a three-digit phone number that customers can easily remember and which is free from the landline provided by that

supplier, making telephone contact easy. However, where problems are with landlines (or where people do not own a telephone to plug into their landline connection) and calling from a mobile phone is the only option, expensive bills can result.

Some prefer to speak to people face-to-face

Some consumers preferred speaking to an employee face-to-face, so preferred going into a shop. The main reason for this was that they felt that they could attract the supplier's attention more easily and get the employee to take ownership of the problem. Some consumers also feel more comfortable speaking to someone in person rather than on the phone. However, not all communications suppliers have high-street shops, so this is not always an option.

> *I tried to ring them... but the reception was bad so it was cutting out, and I was just like 'Oh I can't be bothered with this', so I just decided I would go down and speak to them. It was just easier face-to-face.*
> *Female, 18-34, Northern Ireland*

e-mail is free and provides a record

A few consumers had contacted their suppliers by email. Again, in some cases this was to avoid having to use the phone. Advantages of email include that it is free and that it ensures that the consumer has a record of what they have said and the supplier's responses. However, participants considered that suppliers are often slow to respond to emails, and indeed some consumers said they did not receive a response.

> *I've sent them quite a few emails. They sent one guy out and he says it was fine – the technician – there was no problem, but I have emailed them again since then but I don't get any response. I should really phone them.*
> *Female, 35-64, Scotland*

A small number of consumers mentioned live chat via the provider's website as a means of getting initial advice about a problem, but general awareness and use of these facilities was very low.

Letters were typically reserved for formal communications

Writing a letter was the least common mode of contact, because it is even slower than email and is not guaranteed a response. Consumers who had sent letters did so because it was more formal and they wanted to address it to a particular individual, such as the CEO of the supplier, and often as a last resort because they had not been able to resolve the issue to their satisfaction through another mode.

> *Phoning is fine, but there's no record of a phone call. There might be on the one side, on their side, but you've no record of your own phone call. So a letter really is best, for any kind of dispute.*

Call centre experience

Consumers reported a mix of good and bad experiences of contacting call centres. Their perception of their experience is informed by four elements, as shown in the following diagram, each of which will be discussed in turn.

Figure 2: Elements of the call centre experience

Mixed experiences of getting through to the right person

Some consumers did not have any difficulty getting through to the right person. They described finding the menu relatively easy to navigate, not having to wait on hold for very long, and either getting straight through to the correct department or being transferred to the right team without having to wait in the queue again.

However, consumers who did have problems found this aspect of the experience very frustrating. The most common problems included being kept on hold for a long time, not getting through to the right department, being transferred more than once before getting through to the right department, the call being dropped (which is a particular issue when calls are transferred) and the supplier not calling back when the consumer has requested this.

> *Every single phone call that you placed you were speaking to maybe three or four different people and you were having to explain the problem each and every time.*
> *Male, 35-64, Northern Ireland*

Difficulty in getting through can influence subsequent contact behaviour

Many consumers were not put off by these kinds of experiences and persisted in trying to get their problems resolved, but some consumers did alter their initial behaviour based on

these experiences. For example, some who were kept on hold for what they felt was a long time hung up and called back later, which in some cases was a few hours and in others the next day.

> *[You have to push] maybe four buttons before you even get to start in the queue process... I think the most I've ever waited is about 20 minutes and then I've hung up and retried.*
> *Female, 35-64, Scotland*

One consumer whose call was dropped subsequently went into a shop to speak to someone in person. Suppliers not getting back to consumers was considered to be particularly problematic for some people. One consumer did not receive a reply to an email and did not pursue it for some time. Another consumer with a low income who had requested a call back and then did not receive one gave up because she could not afford to call her supplier again.

Most were positive about politeness and attitude of call centre employees

Consumers were generally positive about the attitude and politeness of call centre staff and often take this for granted. Most consumers described staff as being very polite and making an effort to be helpful. However, a few consumers felt that staff lacked empathy or did not seem to care about their problem, or were unwilling to take ownership and really help them.

> *[The staff were] nice and helpful, apologetic, never any attitude or anything just helpful; doing a good job I think.*
> *Female, 35-64, Scotland*

> *Yes no problems at all, nice staff, helpful. I say in past dealings with them they've been really good you know, they've phoned back at another time just to make sure things were working.*
> *Male, 35-64, Wales*

However, some consumers became frustrated when suppliers either did not possess records of previous calls they had made or where staff were unable to access these, and they had to repeat their story from the beginning. This would influence their perceptions of how helpful staff were in resolving problems. We were given two explanations for having to start from the beginning each time: that some call centre operatives do not have access to previous contact history, and that cases are sometimes logged as 'closed' by the call centre before the consumer felt this was the case.

Both parties' ability to understand each other was most important

The ability of both parties to understand each other and the employee's ability to resolve the problem were the most important factors for most consumers. One of the most common complaints was that call centres were based abroad, and consumers had trouble understanding what staff were saying to them. Moreover, particularly outside of the

southeast of England, consumers often felt that the staff could not understand their accents which meant calls would take much longer as they had to repeat themselves.

> *'Cause sometimes you know there's a bit of a language barrier anyway, some people can't understand me 'cause I have got quite a broad Scouse accent.*
> *Female, 35-64, north England*

For a smaller number of consumers, this problem was compounded by their inability to explain their problem in a way that the call centre staff understood it, and/or their lack of understanding of the technical jargon used by staff when explaining the source of problems or trouble-shooting. This seems to be partly a problem of the terms lay people use to describe problems, which require the call centre staff to infer what the problem is in technical terms and then ask questions to verify that they have understood correctly. Some consumers found this frustrating, especially when they did not think that the call centre staff had understood what was wrong.

> *So you were going round in circles and you were definitely in this massive maze where it seemed to be every exit that you thought was an exit... was just a blank wall.*
> *Female, 65+, north England*

Expertise thought to be lacking in many call centre employees

Ultimately, for most consumers, the most important element is that the person at the other end of the line can solve their problem. Many of the consumers we spoke to complained that call centre staff did not seem to be trained or able to give technical support, but rather relied on a script. For basic or very common problems, this may work; but consumers with more complex problems or for whom the basic trouble-shooting had not worked were often left frustrated by conversations they described as 'going in circles' because staff were following a script that did not suit their circumstances. In a small number of cases where consumers were unable to get staff to depart from what the consumer perceived to be an unhelpful call centre script, they abandoned the process of getting their problem resolved (discussed further in section 5).

A small number of consumers felt that staff proposed unsatisfactory solutions. In some cases, these were solutions that the consumer thought were impractical or would not work. For example, one consumer whose wireless broadband was unsecured and therefore being used by her neighbours was told to turn off her router when she was not using the internet, but her view was that she was paying for the service to be on at all times. Several consumers were told there might be a charge for fixing the problem, and what that charge would be, and while some successfully negotiated for this to be waived, others abandoned the process because they did not want to pay. Finally, some consumers were told that there was nothing the supplier could do to solve the problem.

An example of difficulties communicating with call centre staff is included below.

The impact of the contact experience

Negative initial contact can influence the later customer journey

The first contact that consumers had with their suppliers had an impact on the rest of the customer journey, but only in extreme cases did an initial bad experience lead to the consumer abandoning the attempt to resolve the problem. These were most often cases where the consumer was told the supplier could not resolve the problem or had proposed a solution that would involve a charge. Whilst the customer service experience was a factor in decisions to abandon the resolution process for some consumers, it was only the main driver in a small number of cases where consumers had experienced very poor customer service.

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[4] Case study based on the real experiences of a participant, whose name has been changed to protect anonymity.

In the majority of cases, consumers who had poor experiences persisted, but with certain modified behaviours. For example, some dreaded making further phone calls - which led to procrastination. Others got family or friends involved in calling on their behalf. A small number changed their mode of contact, switching to face-to-face instead of phoning in the hopes of getting a better response.

Contact experiences influence decision to contact in other instances

Contact experiences also impact on subsequent propensity to contact suppliers about problems. Consumers who have had negative past experiences may make calculations about whether or not contact is worthwhile based on the belief that getting the problem resolved will be a lot of hassle, and so in future will only contact suppliers about problems that are fairly major. A small number of consumers reported negative experiences of home visits by engineers, which could be very upsetting, particularly for vulnerable consumers. In one case this acted as a strong barrier to future contact, because the consumer was concerned that an engineer might be sent to her home if a problem was reported.

Those who have had good experiences, on the other hand, may be more likely to contact their suppliers in the future because they have seen how easy it can be to get issues resolved. However, the most important factors in the decision to contact remain the severity of the problem and the belief that the supplier can resolve it.

4. Why people give up

Chapter 7

Innate characteristics impacting on contact behaviour

Chapter 1

Problem identified

Consumer tries to resolve w/out contacting supplier

Consumer finds coping mechanisms

Consumer considers contacting supplier

Consumer does not contact supplier

Coping becomes permanent

Problem resolves itself

Chapter 6

Problem escalated/ compensation sought

Problem not escalated / compensation not sought

Chapters 2 & 3

Consumer contacts supplier (1st time)

Chapter 5

Problem resolved

Switch

Chapter 4

Problem not resolved

Problem abandoned

Consumer contacts supplier (x times)

Consider switching

4. Why people give up

Consumers described experiences of abandoning their attempts to resolve a problem. This section outlines the factors driving this decision to abandon, which can generally be described by three interrelated categories: expectations of the outcome of contact, emotional responses to the contact experience, and perceived inability to proceed.

Summary

Consumers abandoned trying to get their problems resolved due to a change in their expectations of the outcome and/or process. More pessimistic views of possible outcomes were sometimes the result of discovering that the problem was not the responsibility of the supplier, while in others they were the result of coming to the conclusion that the supplier could not do anything to resolve the problem. Consumers sometimes also abandoned because, through the contact experience, they came to realise that the process of getting the problem resolved would be more difficult, inconvenient or costly than they had initially expected.

Unfruitful contact experiences could be particularly frustrating or unpleasant for the consumer, and sometimes strong emotions then influenced their decision to abandon. Where an individual had made contact several times in order to resolve the issue, abandonment was sometimes also driven by a lack of further resources (such as time or money). Another significant barrier experienced by some following an initial contact was that of not knowing whether or not they would be financially liable for a visit by an engineer.

Change in expectations

There are a range of reasons why a consumer's expectations may have been altered following the initial contact process, including: the perception that the supplier cannot solve the problem; the realisation that the responsibility for the problem does not lie with the supplier; the belief that the process will require greater effort than first thought; that the fixing process will be inconvenient, leading to temporary service loss; or that there will be significant repair fees.

Contact sometimes resulted in pessimism about ability to solve the problem

For many who had abandoned, early contact with their service provider had shaken their optimism about the process. While they had initially believed that their provider might be able to resolve the issue easily, they had later come to doubt this. Some now believed that it would not be possible for their supplier to resolve the problem, and hence abandoned. For instance, one participant had reported reception problems on her mobile at home. She was provided with a new handset, but when that did not work she gave up, as she could not see what else the network provider would be able to do.

Not all problems were the service provider's responsibility

In some cases, initial contact could reveal to the consumer that the problem was not in fact the supplier's responsibility, but rather an issue arising from the consumer's use of the service, or a problem with the consumer's personal device. For example, one older consumer thought that the problem with their Pay As You Go handset was something their network provider could help them with but was informed that this was not the case, so gave up.

Achieving a resolution could require more effort than the problem merits

In other cases, where the impact of the service problem was not perceived to be severe, abandonment was simply driven by the perception that resolution would demand greater effort than had first been expected - possibly requiring multiple calls and general persistence. Some consumers explained their abandonment in evaluative terms: that they came to the view that the further costs involved in pursuing the issue, such as call costs, or simply time and effort, would not be worthwhile. For example, one individual stated that he tended to obey a self-imposed time-limit, spending no more than two hours trying to conclude a call, and abandoning after this time if resolution was not forthcoming. Others were less stringent, but would re-evaluate their options if the contact process was felt to be "dragging on".

Resolution might result in loss of service or large bill to pay

Alternatively, contact with the service provider could change expectations about the next steps of the resolution process. Some gave up once they realised that they might have to temporarily go without their service while it was being fixed. A short-term loss of service is strongly feared by some who rely heavily the service, such as isolated individuals who consider their mobile phone to be a safety device. As such, some preferred to persist with small, niggling problems, rather than risk a full, albeit brief, loss of service.

In other cases, abandonment was driven by fear that resolution of the issue would incur large costs, such as the call-out fee of a service engineer.

Emotional responses

Many consumers reported strong emotional responses to the process of contacting their service provider, and in some cases this drove abandonment, usually in conjunction with changes in expectations of the outcome or a perceived inability to advance the process.

Frustration and stress can influence decision to abandon

Many found the contact process stressful, especially call centre experiences. A particular source of stress was frustration at not being able to get anywhere with a call. Some spoke of the process as one of 'being stuck in a loop,' where the caller is passed between contact centre staff without ever finding someone who can help them with their specific issue, or being unable to get staff to depart from a script that the consumer felt was not helping to resolve their problem.

Stronger emotions sometimes caused by failure to achieve resolution or by unpleasant contact experience

A few found the experience of not receiving the help required particularly upsetting, and did not want to go through the experience again. Several spoke of the potentially humiliating experience of being ignored or "fobbed off". Experiences such as these could also trigger the return of negative emotions connected with earlier contact experiences.

> *I was feeling angry that they didn't know why we had no service and to be honest, I just got the impression they didn't really care...I told the girl, I said look I'm sitting here, I'm sitting here by myself, I'm in the house all day myself and I've got no TV. And then I said to her I'm sure you think I'm sad but really I am and I do miss it.*
> *Female, 65+, Northern Ireland*

In a small number of extreme cases, emotions were particularly strong. The consumer whose story is illustrated in the case study below, was left very upset following an engineer visit to her home, feeling that he had treated her badly because he did not listen to her and was "dismissive".

Case study: Samantha[5] – Abandoned for a time after a bad experience with an engineer visit

Samantha is currently unemployed. She lives at home with her two young adult daughters. The internet is important to Samantha for social reasons – her social life centres on Meet-Up groups, so she needs the internet to stay in touch with her friends. Her daughters also rely on the internet to make applications for jobs and complete college work. Samantha decided to get a premium wireless broadband service, but since then she has had ongoing problems with her broadband cutting out at least once per week and being slow.

"I'm just annoyed because I think £30 a month is quite dear for internet, do you know what I mean?"

Samantha delayed getting in touch with her supplier about her broadband problems partly because she did not want to use the phone, but eventually made contact at her daughters' insistence.

The first time Samantha contacted her supplier about her broadband, she did so by email. This was partly to avoid using the phone, and partly because she feels email gave her more time to choose her words to get her point across in the best way. She expected to hear back within a day, but waited two weeks for a reply. The email contained a list of troubleshooting techniques, which made her feel like nobody was listening and that nobody believed what she had to say. In spite of this, she tried the suggestions, but nothing worked so she emailed again. Three days later the supplier wrote back to arrange for a technician to visit.

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[5] Case study based on the real experiences of a participant, whose name has been changed to protect anonymity.

The technician did some checks and said the problem was definitely not the broadband, saying the problem might be with her computer and that she should install updates and de-fragment the drive. When she told him that she was already doing all of this she felt his attitude changed, as though he had stopped listening to her and was in a rush to get to the next job. She felt he looked at her dismissively and made her feel very small. She felt extremely angry about how he had treated her.

"I know what I'm doing when it comes to computers. I think he was just looking at me as if to say I'm either talking rubbish or I don't have a clue how to do it."

Apart from the technician's attitude, she felt frustrated that the problem was being passed back to her as if she was at fault.

She wrote to the provider again, reporting her distress at the visit and underlining her dissatisfaction with the service. This time they responded quickly, saying they would look into the matter, but never got back to her with a resolution. She wrote again two weeks later, but now about one year and nine months have passed and she is still awaiting a reply.

"I just keep thinking about that money every month, I mean I'm not working and I need it."

As a result of the visit by the technician she feels much less inclined to contact again about her problem. In particular, she wants to avoid having another engineer visit her home, causing her to more or less abandon the contact process.

"The only reason I would find it hard to complain again, obviously because I worry about who's going to come to my home, so that's one thing that would maybe stop me."

Meanwhile the problems with her broadband have continued, with a particular impact on her social life and her daughters' coursework.

She is now thinking about switching provider, but still has not started the process. She thinks it may be better to phone to report this, so she is considering asking her neighbour to help her.

"When I do send an email I end up feeling more frustrated, so I think I'm just trying to not even think about it."

In summary, abandonment tended to occur when a fear of further stress outweighs the perceived benefits of pursuing an issue to its resolution.

Inability to proceed

Some didn't know what to do next or how to proceed

For some, a negative initial contact experience resulted in a perceived inability to proceed with the contact. In many of these cases, the participant was simply uncertain about what to do next following the failure of their first attempt, with the result being the loss of momentum. Others suspected that their original approach had indeed been correct, but thought themselves incapable of finding someone who could work "off script" and take ownership of their problem.

For example, one woman whose phone handset broke was told that because she had a SIM-only contract her most cost-effective solution would be to get a new contract (with a phone included). However, this meant she was then paying for two contracts, one of which she was unable to use. When she rang to see if she could find a solution she was told she was locked into the original SIM-only contract for another eight months and they convinced her there was no alternative so she continued to pay both bills.

A few felt they lacked the understanding to resolve the issue

In a few cases, the perceived incapability was of a more technical nature, concerning a lack of technical or legal knowledge, or a lack of skills. For example, one consumer realised following the call that a new handset could potentially solve their problem. However, they were unsure about the status of their contract and their rights as a customer and therefore did not know whether it would be possible for them to get a new handset. In another case, a consumer was informed that, in order to take their enquiry forward, they would need to provide details (such as dates and times) of the occurrences of their problem. The individual had not kept a record of such details, however, and did not feel capable of gathering this information. Finally, some customers find themselves incapable of continuing due to the use of technical language during a call, because they are not able to interpret and perform the troubleshooting instructions given to them via the helpline. In particular, many older people struggled to identify such pieces of equipment as modems and routers.

> *They use terms I don't understand [...] you know they'll say 'have you sorted out the router' or something and I'll say 'what router'. You know, that sort of thing.*
> *Female, 65+, Wales*

Giving up after a protracted contact process

In addition to the factors driving abandonment described above, a further set of issues were sometimes faced by consumers who gave up after contacting their provider multiple times. In a few protracted cases, consumers abandoned simply because they found that they could not get anywhere, believing the service provider unwilling to deal with the issue, or simply as a result of not being able to find an individual who would take care of the issue.

Case study: Mohammed[6] – Abandoned due to shaken optimism about getting problem resolved

Mohammed used to be an office manager but is currently unemployed. He lives in London with his parents, and has two young children. He is a volunteer manager of a 5-a-side football team, which involves organising training and matches, including ensuring the team will have enough players for each match.

Mohammed is generally not comfortable complaining about things. He does not see himself as a complainer, and the last time he had an issue that needed sorting out (unfair bank charges), he asked a friend to phone on his behalf to get it fixed.

"You know coming into complaints and that, I'm not the best to deal with them... I just leave it alone."

Mohammed chose his smartphone network because they offered good value for money, even though he says they are known for having poor network coverage. Mohammed is heavily reliant on his mobile phone. He is on it constantly to check email, call players, keep in touch with his children and their mother, and watch TV and movies and having reception at all times is very important.

"Everything is from my phone and without this I'm lost... you lose the phone, and that's it, the world almost ends."

Mohammed has had an ongoing problem with reception, in his home and at friends' houses. At first he just put up with the problem, partly because he wasn't sure if it was something he was doing wrong; this was his first smartphone so he was not very confident about how to use it. He eventually decided to get the phone checked because the warranty was due to expire. He took into the store where he had bought the phone and asked for a new handset to try but instead they offered to send it off to be checked. Mohammed was unwilling to be without a smartphone for 3-4 weeks, so he declined.

"I kept blaming the phone, [but the store where I bought it said] no it's nothing wrong with the phone, probably the network."

A few months later when he was still experiencing problems, he called his network provider. He did not expect them to have good customer service because they are quite a cheap supplier, but he still expected to find out what was wrong and that the supplier would either fix the problem or give him a new phone. Instead, Mohammed had to wait on hold for about 15 minutes, and when he got through to someone he did not understand what they were trying to explain to him. He felt like they were reading off a script. At the end of the call he was "fuming", and nothing was resolved. He called again twice more and had similar experiences.

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[6] Case study based on the real experiences of a participant, whose name has been changed to protect anonymity.

"Every time I call them up I get a call centre in India and you're trying to explain your problem and it just feels like they're reading off a script... it's like they're not listening to you."

Now, Mohammed is waiting for his contract to run out, and then plans to switch supplier. He thinks he can wait until the end of his contract because the problem is intermittent. He is still unsure whether the problem is his fault and if it is not, whether it is with the phone itself or his network, and consequently he is not sure who he should pursue it with and does not feel confident taking it further. On top of that, because he got nowhere with either company, he now believes the problem will never be fixed, so does not see the point in contacting anyone again.

"I just stopped. I just went 'right we're not getting anywhere'. And now maybe if I pursued it further, made a couple of complaints, went down to the shop and put my foot down a bit, I think I could have solved the matter, but I just couldn't be bothered with it, it was just too much headache for me, as long as my phone was working 90% of the time it's more than enough for me."

It is clear that the impacts on consumers' time or, where the calls were not free, on their finances, can be significant drivers for abandoning attempts to resolve problems.

5. Resolution

Chapter 7
Innate characteristics impacting on contact behaviour

Chapter 1
- Problem identified
- Consumer tries to resolve w/out contacting supplier
- Consumer finds coping mechanisms
- Consumer considers contacting supplier
- Consumer does not contact supplier
- Coping becomes permanent
- Problem resolves itself

Chapter 6
- Problem escalated/ compensation sought
- Problem not escalated / compensation not sought

Chapters 2 & 3
- Consumer contacts supplier (1st time)

Chapter 5
- Problem resolved
- Switch

Chapter 4
- Problem not resolved
- Problem abandoned
- Consumer contacts supplier (x times)
- Consider switching

5. Resolution

This section explores the ways in which consumers resolved problems with their communications services. Our research suggests that customer journeys ending in resolution took one of three forms:

- Resolution following a single contact with the provider

- More complicated journeys ending in resolution

- Overcoming the service issue by switching provider

Summary

Consumers whose problems are simple or are caused by a wider fault tended to be able to get their problem resolved following a single helpline contact.

Others had been successful as a result of reaching an individual able to help with more complicated issues, who would often not be a standard call centre operative. Some achieved this quickly through knowing how to have their call escalated; others may only have done so following multiple calls, either through luck or by finding an alternative route to the key contact, such as a colleague or neighbour.

Where a problem could not be resolved, some consumers opted to switch, although others did not see this as a viable option. Reasons for not switching tended to be financial, related to fear of the switching process, or due to negative perceptions of the marketplace.

Resolution from a single contact

Some customers did manage to resolve their problem by contacting their service provider just once. In many of these cases the possibility of swift resolution was determined by the nature of the problem, whilst others succeeded by immediately reaching someone who could provide personalised help.

Some problem types are easily resolved by a single contact

Where the consumer's problem was caused by a wider service fault that the provider was already aware of, the enquiry would often be resolved by a single call. Customers were reassured by confirmation that the problem was already being fixed. Consumers preferred, if possible, to be informed of the date and time that the problem would be resolved, as these details were perceived as a further guarantee that the issue was being addressed.

Simple or common problems could also be resolved with a single call, because they are typically well-suited to call centre scripts. Examples include basic technical problems that can be resolved through re-booting or by checking the connections.

More complex problems can be resolved by reaching the right person

Where the problem was more individualised or complex, swift resolution generally depended on being able to speak to someone helpful. In a few cases the consumer found it easy to get through to an expert who could help them. In other cases, this was achieved via the consumer's ability to "play the system." For example, some consumers reached someone who could help them by asking to speak to a manager in a particularly persuasive manner.

I speak to someone very [senior] – as senior as I can get because I don't mess around, so I push them as hard as I can.
Female, 35-64, London

Others found success by using a ploy, such as threatening to leave the provider for a competitor. On the other hand, some participants already possessed a direct number to a helpful member of staff that they had been given during a previous issue. This enabled them to bypass the call centre system and register their issue with someone with greater technical expertise or executive power.

But not all consumers succeed in navigating the contact system

Some consumers had attempted to "play the system" but had not been successful. For example, some would request to speak to a manager, but lacked the confidence to carry on when faced with a barrier, such as being told there was no manager available. Similarly, some felt that there wasn't a credible alternative provider, so feared that a threat to leave would be seen as hollow.

More complicated journeys

Having a 'key contact' helps solve more protracted cases

Where the path towards resolution was not immediately found, the eventual solution tended to result from persistence, luck or a 'key contact' being found. The 'key contact' was a person who took ownership of the problem and helped the consumer get it resolved. This was a common theme across the interviews, and something actively sought by some consumers when making first contact. Some consumers were lucky, simply happening to get through to such a person after several attempts (but without knowing what they had done differently).

So in the end I spoke to someone, she was lovely. She went 'of course we can do it'. She went 'I'll add that back on for you within half an hour' and she did. I was like so why was one person telling me no you can't?
Female, 65+, north England

A few achieved resolution through someone else who helped them find a 'key contact': often a friend, neighbour or colleague.

> *I only finally got my problem with my landline fixed because I found out my neighbour was a senior employee at [provider].*
>
> *Male, 35-64, Northern Ireland*

Other people were simply persistent, continually contacting the supplier until they got through to someone who could help them, or until the problem was otherwise solved.

Switching provider

Where a problem could not be resolved, or where the consumer remained unhappy with the service provided, many considered switching service provider. However, a number of consumers reported that they did not see switching provider as a viable option. Three general themes were identified as to why some did not intend to switch provider: financial reasons, negative expectations of the switching process, and negative perceptions of the communications marketplace.

Financial barriers can impede switching

For some, the reason against switching was financial. Some customers understood that they were locked into a fixed term contract, and believed that they would need to pay a penalty for exiting the contract before completion of the term. Also, some consumers subscribed to a bundle service, where landline, fixed broadband and possibly also pay TV services were tied to a single contract. Where consumers were unhappy with only one service within the bundle and did not wish to change provider for all services, they cited the difficulty of leaving just one part of the bundle deal. In other cases the convenience of a bundle package, with only one provider and one bill to pay, outweighed dissatisfaction with parts of the service.

> *I'd rather just have problems with one and argue with one than have two.*
> *Female, 35-64, north England*

Other consumers felt that their supplier was the cheapest, and that switching provider would mean facing higher costs. As discussed in section 1, some consumers expected to receive a lesser service because their contract was relatively cheap. In a few cases, emotional ties with the financial benefits of a package were evident. For example, one consumer spoke of enjoying the free mobile phone calls he received to his wife, who used the same service provider. He stated that this made him less inclined to change provider, in spite of the poor reception he received inside his home. (It should be noted that he had not investigated whether a similar benefit could be received via a different provider.)

> *We both have [this] network because it don't cost to phone one another [...] I don't think [the network] is particularly good, but as I said it's handy for me and her and I don't use it that much indoors.*

Negative expectations of the switching process can be a barrier

For others, the process of switching was cited as a barrier. A few reported bad experiences of switching in the past, some of which were not limited to the communications sector. For example, one participant explained that a particularly upsetting experience when changing energy provider, involving billing problems that took months to resolve, was the reason why he didn't want to change any of his communications services.

Others viewed switching as a hassle. Views varied from the non-specific, where consumers simply suspected that changing provider would require a great deal of effort, to particular issues with contacting providers. One consumer described several extremely frustrating calls to her landline and fixed broadband provider in the past, both when reporting problems and to discuss billing. She said that she would not switch provider because she did not want to have to contact them in order to do so.

More generally, many were of the attitude that they would rather live with niggling problems than go to the trouble of switching. The fear of service discontinuity was mentioned by some as a reason not to switch.

Some do not believe that a credible alternative provider exists

The third and final set of barriers to switching related to perceptions of the marketplace. A few consumers simply believed that a credible alternative did not exist for them, either because competitors did not offer a similarly high level of service (such as super-fast broadband), or, in a minority of cases, because the consumer understood that no other provider would supply their area.

> *They've already told us this is the only provider for this area, so you know put up or shut up, you know you can't say if you don't do this we'll go to [another provider].*
> *Male, 65+, south England*

In one case a consumer with a disability felt that she had no alternative to her existing mobile phone provider, due to her preferred payment method. She did not possess a bank account and her existing provider was the only one she could find that would allow her to pay for a contract in cash. This lack of an alternative also contributed to a feeling of resignation about the problems she experienced. (See case study in section 7 for further detail.)

Some are less likely to switch because they do not trust the marketplace

Others disclosed a pessimistic view of the industry. A few mentioned their mistrust of "good" deals, such that they found it difficult to judge whether an alternative would be suitable for them. Some expected the price of the deal to increase significantly after they had enjoyed the introductory offer, and others were not sure if a low cost service would be as good, with mobile phone reception and broadband speeds being particularly of concern. Such views were often bound up with frustration that the price of their existing

service had increased year on year, with little they could do to stop it. Finally, a few exhibited a more general pessimism about the market: that providers are "all the same" and that prices and service levels were not sufficiently varied to make switching worth their while.

However, some do use switching as a way of resolving an issue

A small number of consumers in the research did see switching supplier as the easiest way to resolve the problem. One consumer described how a combination of factors led him to believe that the quickest way to resolve the problem he was having with his broadband was to switch supplier.

> *I was beginning to feel that I wasn't going to get anywhere... because of what I had read in the press and the experience that I had with the actual broadband and what I was encountering in trying to get it sorted... it really was the pendulum swing to 'Nah, you're moving away'... I wasn't prepared to spend too much time trying to get it sorted.*
> *Male, 65+, Scotland*

6. Escalation and compensation

Chapter 7

Innate characteristics impacting on contact behaviour

Chapter 1

Problem identified → Consumer tries to resolve w/out contacting supplier → Consumer finds coping mechanisms → Consumer considers contacting supplier → Consumer does not contact supplier → Coping becomes permanent / Problem resolves itself

Chapter 6

Problem escalated/ compensation sought

Problem not escalated / compensation not sought

Chapters 2 & 3

Consumer contacts supplier (1st time)

Chapter 4

Problem not resolved → Problem abandoned

Chapter 5

Problem resolved

Consumer contacts supplier (x times) → Consider switching

Switch

6. Escalation and compensation

In cases where a problem has not been resolved to the satisfaction of the consumer, escalation of the issue is an option; and whether a problem has been resolved or not, consumers may seek compensation. However, the majority of consumers interviewed did not escalate their problem or seek compensation following the contact process, with several factors influencing this decision. This section discusses the drivers and barriers to this decision in more detail.

Summary

Across the interviews we encountered low levels of knowledge about the process of formal escalation: many consumers were unaware of their options for escalation, when they might utilise them, and how, including what information would be needed.

Following the experience of contacting the service provider, many consumers lacked the motivation to pursue their issue further, anticipated a difficult process and doubted the possibility of achieving a positive outcome that would justify the time and effort spent.

Another significant issue was the difficulty many consumers would have in recording their problem and contact experience, or of gathering this data retrospectively. Without this evidence about the case, some thought formal escalation could not be pursued.

The few who did escalate their problem tended to do so as a result of strong feelings - such as anger or perceived injustice – and often this was as a result of a significant financial loss.

Barriers to escalation and compensation

Many had not thought about escalating their problem (beyond asking to speak with a manager at the time)

Many consumers whose problem had not been resolved in a satisfactory manner reported that they had never thought about escalating the issue, either internally with the supplier, or with a third party, such as the industry ADR schemes. This tended to be the case when the issue had quite a low impact, or when the service issue had been resolved and the dissatisfaction stemmed only from the process of getting it resolved. For example, one consumer had his landline issue resolved, but was angry that one technician hadn't offered to remove his muddy boots before walking through his house. However, his dissatisfaction was not strong enough for him to consider complaining to the service provider about the technician.

> *Now with hindsight I would write to the head honcho as they say, the head person, explaining the situation and asking for the matter to be dealt with promptly.* Female, 65+, Scotland

Many had low expectations about their provider's formal complaints process

When it came to complaining formally to their service provider, many had low or negative expectations of the escalation process and its outcome, usually based on their recent experience of contacting the company. Some shared the perception that the provider would not consider the issue a priority and wouldn't necessarily deal with it any better than they had dealt with the original problem. Pessimism about the likelihood of achieving a positive result was also common.

Lack of knowledge about third-party escalation processes could be a barrier

In other cases, the consumer had considered taking the issue further but abandoned due to a lack of knowledge of how to escalate (or who to escalate to). This lack may simply have been about who to contact, or could have pertained to uncertainty about the individual's rights as a customer, and hence about whether or not they had a real cause for complaint.

More generally, across all interviews there was relatively low awareness of the industry ADR schemes and their role with many not realising this option might be available to them.

Many do not want to spend any more time on the issue

For many, the notion of spending more time pursuing the problem did not appeal. In some cases, emotional or mental fatigue was a factor, with the consumer lacking the energy to take things further. Where the contact process had been particularly upsetting, a few expressed anxiety or dread at the notion of prolonging the issue. In a small number of cases the barrier was more practical, with the individual not having any more time to spend on the problem.

> *I thought I might speak, yes, to the Ombudsman about it but I don't have time to keep going through all those things.*
> *Female, 35-64, London*

Some would struggle to present evidence of the problem for formal escalation

Another barrier mentioned by some was the burden of being able to provide detailed data concerning problems, such as dates and times of issues or calls, duration of problems and steps taken to troubleshoot or attempt a fix. While this was also cited by a few as a reason for abandoning the contact process ahead of resolution, it appeared a greater issue when it came to formal escalation. The escalation process was viewed as more official, and some thought of it in legal terms; hence some believed that a robust set of clear facts would be required. Some who had not collected this data, and who felt unable to do so retrospectively, believed this meant that any attempt to seek official redress would fail.

In a few cases, providing written evidence could be a barrier to pursuing an issue, even with the prospect of compensation. In one case, a fixed broadband customer was told by a customer representative that the provider would compensate her for service failures if she recorded the problems she experienced. However, the consumer found it difficult to write this information down systematically and therefore decided not to pursue the matter.

Case study: Frank[7] – Did not seek compensation because did not believe he would get it and was emotionally exhausted

Frank owns a small shop with a staff of five. He uses his landline in the evenings to chat to his friends and family, and broadband first thing in the morning and for a few hours each evening for work purposes. He recently moved into a new-build home, and had tried to ensure the landline and broadband would be installed by the time they moved in by letting the supplier know two months in advance. However, on the Friday they moved in, Frank discovered the landline had not been installed.

"It was arranged several months in advance that my number was being transferred from my old house, and that the line was to be switched on, and it didn't happen…"

"The day we were moving in [the supplier] had arrived to connect the phone and there was a problem with the line… they couldn't do anything about it because it's another section of [the company] and it was then that I started to discover that to get a line coming from 50 meters up the road into my house takes three different sets of engineers who don't coordinate with each other."

The engineer who had come to connect the phone said that he would look into it and they would come back on Monday. On Monday, the engineer that came said it was another department that needed to "flick a switch on the main box" and this could not be done for another week. Frank called his supplier to say that this should have been checked before he moved in and therefore should be a priority but they said there was nothing they could do. Then the supplier broke several appointments over a period of weeks.

"It took several weeks of me sitting in the house several times a week to try and get a phone line connected, and a lot of phone calls to [the supplier]… I was having to take time off work and get people to cover me."

As the problem was with Frank's landline, he contacted his supplier from his mobile. This was very expensive. Near the time when he got the problem resolved, Frank was given a dedicated number to call, but this was also expensive and still resulted in him getting transferred to various departments, on average 3-4 different ones per call.

"My mobile phone bill for one month was I think £128, and it was all [phoning the supplier]."

Frank's problem was resolved when he discovered his neighbour was a senior employee of his supplier, who was able to help him get it fixed.

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[7] Case study based on the real experiences of a participant, whose name has been changed to protect anonymity.

"Ultimately it was only sorted out because one of my neighbours, it turns out, is a senior manager with [the supplier] and got it sorted out within 24 hours of him knowing about it. Prior to that I was getting nowhere, it was really frustrating."

Although Frank spent a lot of money and time over a three week period trying to get the problem resolved, he has not sought compensation from his supplier because based on his experience to date he thought it would be difficult, and once the problem was fixed he just wanted to forget about it.

"I did intend to send them a bill and write a letter and do various things, but when I came back [from holiday], the phone line was on, I just left it... I kind of thought 'What's the point in spending a couple of hours for them to go "So what?"' I just thought I'd be wasting more time."

Drivers of escalation and pursuit of compensation

Knowledge and skills facilitate escalation

Customers who had escalated or sought compensation tended to have greater awareness of who to contact and how to do so, did not decisively object to the prospect of spending more time on the issue, and believed that a positive outcome was possible. These individuals also tended to keep a record of the problem and the contact process or had been able to gather this information retrospectively. They also tended to possess strong interpersonal skills and hence were not daunted by the prospect of taking the issue further.

Strong emotions usually involved in escalation

Escalation tended to be driven by strong feelings, which often stirred a competitive instinct to win the 'battle' against the company. Some cited anger, either at their perceived mistreatment by the provider, or due to upsetting consequences of a problem. Some individuals spoke of injustice, relating the issue to their rights as a consumer.

Financial impact of a problem can drive escalation

In addition to the absence of barriers, the few who decided to escalate were often prompted by a serious financial impact, particularly where a large and discrete sum of money was involved. A single extremely high bill was cited by some, either due to a service error or due to costs accrued in pursuing the issue. In other cases a problem had a financial impact otherwise unrelated to the service. For example, one consumer believed that an internet outage for two days had denied him and his friends the chance to book cheap holiday tickets. The difference between these and the more expensive tickets the group eventually bought amounted to several hundred pounds. As a result, the consumer was particularly determined to reclaim this money and had pursued the issue for several months.

However, a financial impact was not always a sufficient motivation for escalation, particularly where this impact was spread over a longer period of time or over several payments. For example, two different individuals who had overpaid on mobile phone contracts for several months, amounting to significant costs, decided not to pursue a refund or compensation. Each spoke of not having enough time, but their motivation may also have been lessened by the fact that they tended not to think about the total amount of money they had overpaid, but rather the smaller amount it was costing them each month. In other examples, either the supplier had indicated that the problem was resolved or could go no further, or the person lacked the energy even if the financial impact was high.
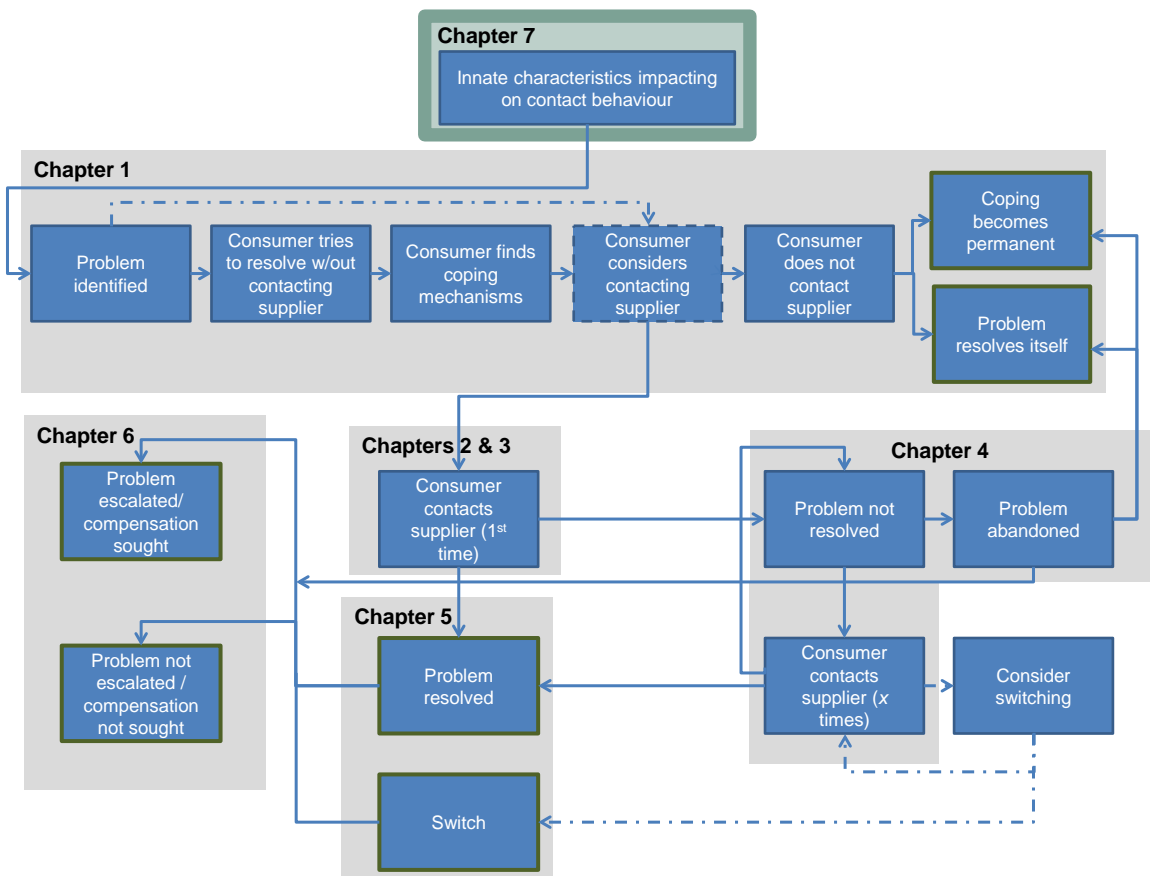
A few see formal escalation of issues as a social duty

Another reason to escalate, mentioned by a couple of participants, is doing so for the good of society. One consumer said she wrote a formal letter to her supplier in the hope that others would not have to suffer from the same customer issues she had experienced.

> *If I have an issue I want to make sure I would hope that no-one else goes through it*
> *Female, 35-64, London*

However, in another case this ethic was not in itself a strong enough motivation to drive escalation. The participant in question took issue with the fact that, at the end of her fixed-term mobile phone contract, she had been automatically been placed onto a rolling contact of the same price. She reasoned that one part of the cost of the fixed-term contract was to pay for the handset she had received, and that this cost should have expired with the end of the contract, so that she should have transferred to a cheaper, SIM-only rate. She believed that she had been taken advantage of by the provider, and during the interview she explicitly stated that she was motivated to complain so that others would not be treated in the same way. She had considered writing to the ADR scheme about the issue, and believed that this was something she ought to do, but nevertheless did not do so, citing a lack of time.

7. The influence of personal characteristics

Chapter 7
Innate characteristics impacting on contact behaviour

Chapter 1
Problem identified → Consumer tries to resolve w/out contacting supplier → Consumer finds coping mechanisms → Consumer considers contacting supplier → Consumer does not contact supplier → Coping becomes permanent / Problem resolves itself

Chapter 6
Problem escalated/ compensation sought
Problem not escalated / compensation not sought

Chapters 2 & 3
Consumer contacts supplier (1st time)

Chapter 4
Problem not resolved → Problem abandoned
Consumer contacts supplier (x times) → Consider switching

Chapter 5
Problem resolved
Switch

7. The influence of personal characteristics

Although the way that the consumers we spoke to responded to problems was partly a function of the problems themselves and the context they were facing when they encountered them, certain innate characteristics also influenced their behaviour. This section outlines these pre-existing drivers of and barriers to contact. It also details the key drivers of and barriers to contact for demographic groups of special interest to the Panel: older consumers, consumers living in rural areas, consumers with disabilities and consumers with low incomes.

Summary

There were a number of innate traits and contextual factors that often influenced contact behaviour. These included consumers' self-perceptions, including the type of person they saw themselves as (for example, as 'not a complainer,' or as someone who fights for their rights), and their beliefs about their skills and capabilities; their perceptions of the supplier and their relationship to the supplier, sometimes based on previous contact experiences; their professional roles and how this related to the tasks involved in the contact process; their mental and practical skills (including interpersonal skills and technology-related abilities); and their social network, in terms of whether it was generally supportive of contact, or tended to inhibit contact.

In some cases, demographic characteristics also had an impact on consumers' behaviours, either directly or by influencing attitudes and expectations. Consumers living in rural areas and older consumers tended to have lower expectations of services. Older consumers were often also more reliant on advice from family and friends about the cause of problems and whether or not to contact suppliers about them. Consumers with disabilities faced more physical barriers to contact than other consumers, which sometimes influenced their attitude about whether or not contact was worth pursuing. For those with low incomes, the cost of contacting a supplier and the cost of resolving the problem were sometimes major concerns that could act as barriers to initial contact, or which could drive abandonment later on.

Pre-existing drivers and barriers to contact

The way that consumers saw themselves impacted on their propensity to contact their suppliers.

Consumers who had contacted their suppliers often saw themselves as capable and people who usually fight for their rights. Consumers who had contacted their suppliers about problems often had a more competitive instinct than those who had not. Some also displayed a greater degree of concern about fairness in their lives generally. These desires to 'beat the supplier' or to correct perceived injustices functioned as added incentives for some consumers to contact their suppliers when they had problems.

Some consumers perceived reporting problems with services as a duty, whether in order to help suppliers improve their services, or in order to protect more vulnerable consumers who might be experiencing the same problem but are less able to contact their suppliers about it.

> *I believe in feedback... if they don't know [about the problem], they can't fix it.*
> *Female, 35-64, Scotland*

On the other hand, some consumers did not like to think of themselves as a "complainer," which tended to act as a barrier to contacting their supplier for issues that appeared less serious. Also, some consumers, usually older, identified themselves as not technologically-minded, and hence felt less confident about reporting issues with their services.

Consumers' perceptions of their supplier, and the perceived strength of the relationship, can influence their propensity to contact

In some cases, consumers had a very positive image of the brand supplying them, so regardless of the problem they encountered, they were more likely to contact their suppliers because they believed the company would respond well and help them resolve it. However, in other instances people assumed that 'good' suppliers would already know about a problem and would be doing everything they could to resolve it and therefore it could potentially be a barrier to contact.

Some consumers also took the view that they were good customers so the suppliers would be likely to want to ensure they were happy with their services.

Some consumers who had contacted their suppliers had positive expectations of the process and this meant they had a more positive outlook on the potential for success.

> *I've never had a problem with [my TV provider] I can't kind of rave about them enough. And the service is [great], because every time I phone [the provider] they've been brilliant, done what they said*
> *Female, 18-34, South England*

Conversely, a negative image of the brand often acted as a barrier to contact, because of negative expectations of either the contact process or of the likelihood of the problem being resolved. This view was usually based on earlier poor customer experiences with the supplier. However, it could also be based on word of mouth or media stories about a particular supplier being less responsive. Additionally, as discussed earlier, some people had shopped around for a low cost supplier and expected lower quality service as a result.

Underlying capabilities are also important drivers of contact

Consumers who had contacted their suppliers were often reasonably confident in their technological abilities or capability to understand some technical jargon, had good interpersonal skills and were well-organised and good time managers.

In some cases, contacting suppliers involved similar tasks to those consumers had performed or were performing in their professional lives, which meant they felt comfortable doing them.

Where these skills were absent, or where people perceived they were absent, consumers were typically less likely to contact their supplier. Some consumers who were unsure what their problem was or did not feel they could explain it well felt anxious about contacting their suppliers because they did not think they would be able to make themselves understood. Some were also worried that they might not understand the technical language used by staff.

> *I don't feel able to explain properly what the problem is.*
> *Female, 65+, North England*

Consumers' social environments influenced propensity to contact

Consumers were also influenced by the attitudes of their friends, family, neighbours and colleagues towards contacting suppliers about problems. Many of those consumers who contacted their suppliers had acquaintances who were generally supportive of or had modelled this kind of behaviour.

> *I was going to give up, but my colleagues told me not to let them get away with it.*
> *Male, 35-64, south England*

In some cases, however, social influences could reduce the likelihood of making contact, either because a trusted individual was pessimistic about the contact process, or because there was a broad social consensus about the low chances of a common, local problem being fixed (such as poor mobile reception or broadband connectivity in a rural area).

Older consumers

Certain barriers to contact were more prevalent among older consumers. These included lack of knowledge about technology, lower expectations of service and in some cases heavier reliance on advice from others and low levels of reliance on the service because it was typically only used for leisure purposes. However, this was not the case for all older consumers. For example some were more reliant on advice from family and friends and therefore would contact their supplier if somebody told them to. Also, some felt particularly reliant on their communications services and in these instances would be more likely to contact.

Older consumers more likely to have low expectations of the service

As previously discussed, consumers with higher expectations of services were more likely to perceive problems as severe than those with lower expectations. Older consumers were more likely not to know what to expect from or to have lower expectations of certain services, such as broadband and mobile phones - because they had less experience of these services than younger consumers.

You know is this what you come to expect, because you're not in that world of technology, you just think yes this is good when it works.
Male, 65+, South England

In some cases this led to older consumers being unsure if they had a problem or not, and being unclear if the problem lay with their device or the service itself, and therefore not contacting their suppliers.

Older consumers often more anxious about discussing technology

Compared to younger consumers, older consumers were more likely to lack confidence in deciding that the problem they were encountering was with the service and not as a result of something that they were doing wrong. Moreover, they tended to be nervous about discussing technological issues. Some feared contacting their suppliers because they did not think they would be able to understand what the staff would say to them or they thought staff might ask them to do some trouble-shooting and they would not understand what to do. These also acted as barriers for some older consumers.

Many older consumers were reliant on advice of family and friends

Linked to being unsure of what they can expect from a service, older consumers tended to be more reliant on advice from family members about the source of a problem and whether or not they should contact their supplier about it. The older consumers we spoke to appeared to have received a variable quality of advice from family members. For example, one had been advised by her son-in-law that her problem was with her computer but her supplier subsequently contacted her to say that she may have been issued a faulty router. Others had been encouraged not to put up with a poor service and to contact their suppliers.

Level of reliance on service was a key driver of whether or not to contact

Reasons for using the service can be an important driver or barrier for older consumers to contact suppliers. Older consumers were more likely to use some services such as broadband for leisure purposes as opposed to business purposes, and were therefore more inclined to adjust their use of the service, for example, by waiting to use it or using it at a different time of day, than to contact their suppliers. However, some older consumers felt very reliant on certain services, often their landline or mobile phone, for safety (for those who were disabled, ill or very frail) or simply because they felt the need to be able to be in touch with family. This meant that they were quick to contact suppliers if any problems impacted on these services.

Consumers living in rural areas

Rural-based consumers tended to have lower expectations of service level

Consumers living in rural areas were more likely than those living in urban and suburban areas to have lower expectations of service quality and to believe that the problems they experienced could not be resolved. Broadband and mobile phone users living in rural areas, in particular, often believed that a poorer quality service was to be expected because there were fewer mobile phone towers in their area and broadband infrastructure was not as good as in cities. As these consumers quite often knew another person in the area experiencing similar problems, they believed that the service they were being provided was 'normal for the area'. Compounding these low expectations of the services was a belief that as the problems were linked to infrastructure, providers would not be able to improve services.

> *I've never complained about it to anybody except for the guys from [the local TV repair shop}... They said you've always had that sort of problem up there and you think okay then, so you know, you've got to accept the things you can't change.*
> *Male, 65+, South England*

Case study: John[8] – Never contacted supplier because believes slow broadband due to living in rural area and nothing supplier can do about it

John is semi-retired and supports his wife to run a Post Office. He lives in a rural area with his wife and son.

John and his family like to use their broadband to watch BBC iPlayer, but often while they're watching a programme, the iPlayer buffers and they find this frustrating. John's son complains to him that the problem is that their broadband is slow.

"My son tells me that it's really slow. It bothers him more than me."

John has tried to check his bandwidth on websites, but he does not really understand the results. He has also looked online for solutions, and from those searches has discovered that his supplier is not well-rated for their speed or customer service. John believes the problem stems from living in a rural area. In the past, John has spoken to neighbours about their broadband and believes they also have this kind of problem, which has reinforced his belief that it is a village-wide problem (although in another interview a few streets away a different participant told us that high speed broadband was now available in the village). He also knows he lives quite far from the exchange.

"I work in the next village along. At work the broadband is really fast, but they petitioned for it whereas here we got left behind."

John has never contacted his supplier about the problem because he thinks the company should already be providing the best service it can, so contacting them will not make it any better. Therefore, when a problem is serious, he will typically change provider rather than try to get it resolved.

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[8] Case study based on the real experiences of a participant, whose name has been changed to protect anonymity.

However, for him, this problem is also relatively minor because he does not consider the service to be vital. He also has negative expectations of the process, believing that the call centre staff will be difficult to understand and that they will not understand his problem. He thinks it might take an hour or more to resolve, and he does not want to spend this much time on the problem.

Consumers with disabilities

Disabled consumers experience a number of challenges distinct to those of other consumers.

For some consumers there are physical barriers to contacting suppliers

Some consumers with disabilities had more physical barriers to contacting their suppliers or conducting trouble-shooting whilst on the phone to their suppliers than other consumers. For example, some consumers had difficulty hearing or trouble understanding people with certain pitches of voice. One consumer procrastinated about phoning his supplier due to his difficulty hearing some people, and on several occasions when he had called his supplier he had had to pass the phone to his wife to continue the conversation because he could not hear the person on the other end of the line.

> *It's a strange thing the hearing thing, it's not that you can't actually hear, it's there, but the words sort of go into one another if you follow my meaning, it's sort of like a jumbled together.*
> *Male, 65+, South England*

Other consumers with disabilities were less mobile or experienced pain when moving. One consumer, who suffered from a condition affecting her mobility, sometimes struggled to climb upstairs to her router. This made her less likely at times to make contact about a problem from her downstairs phone as she would not be able to troubleshoot the issue.

Finally, some consumers who had difficulty seeing or reading had problems with certain trouble-shooting tasks. For example, a consumer with dyslexia explained that reading a long series of letters and numbers, such as the code on her router, was "a nightmare".

Consumers with a disability sometimes require stronger motivation to make contact

These physical barriers also impacted on consumers' motivations and opportunities. For example, some consumers with disabilities had really considered whether or not they needed to contact their suppliers because, for them, the contact process took substantial effort. Some said that had their problems been less severe, they may have coped rather than made contact.

Some consumers with a disability have a strong contact mode preference

In addition, some consumers with disabilities preferred one method of contacting their supplier over another. For example, some consumers with difficulty hearing found it easier

to talk to someone in person than on the phone, and one who described herself as having 'phone phobia' preferred to email her supplier. If a consumer's preferred mode is not available (for example, the supplier does not have a high street shop) or the supplier does not respond well when contacted through the preferred mode (for example, does not reply to emails), these can be barriers to contact.

Case study: Jane[9] – The experience of a disabled consumer living with a mobile phone reception problem

Jane is a middle-aged woman in an urban area who has a mobility disability and uses a wheelchair. She does some volunteer work when she's feeling well, but her health status varies too often to allow her to commit to regular paid work.

Jane moved into a new flat and since then has not had mobile reception in her home. Jane's disability means that the lack of in-home mobile reception affects her badly – she can't go outside to use her phone easily.

"You shouldn't have to go outside to use your phone."

She also started a new mobile contract and eventually realised she was unable to receive picture messages or surf the web on her new smartphone. This prevented her from receiving a number of picture messages sent by her mother, which she found very upsetting.

"My mum wants to know why I'm not getting [the photos]."

Jane prefers to speak to suppliers face to face, because she feels struggles to explain things over the phone. She visited her supplier's shop twice to try to get the problems resolved. Both times the customer assistants told her they did not know what the problem was, and they did not give her any further help or advice. She feels that her disability led to her problems not being taken seriously.

"I was always told the customer is supposed to be treated with respect, but sometimes you don't feel as if you're being heard in a wheelchair."

Because her current supplier is the only company that will allow her to pay for a contract in cash, Jane feels unable to resolve the problem by switching supplier.

Jane knows that she has to change her phone, but doesn't know if she can do this on her contract. In particular, she isn't sure if her problem is serious enough to allow her to get a new phone.

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[9] Case study based on the real experiences of a participant, whose name has been changed to protect anonymity.

> *"If you've signed a contract you can't change it unless there is something really bad with the phone."*
>
> She no longer believes that her supplier will help her so does not think there is any point in contacting them again.
>
> *"I do think it's a bad enough problem, but I've given up in disgust...I'm not being heard."*

Consumers with low incomes

Some consumers with low incomes experience particular anxieties about costs involved in the contact process, which can act as powerful barriers to making initial contact or to persevering until resolution is achieved.

Cost of contact can act as a significant barrier

For some consumers with low incomes,[10] the cost of contacting the supplier was a serious concern. Particularly for those who believed the problem would require a long phone call or several phone calls to resolve, and who had no alternative to a mobile, the cost of contact was a barrier.

> *The problem I have is if there's a problem with the lines out here, which is part of the problem that I have with an internet connection, if I have to ring [supplier] they charge me [because it is a premium rate line for technical support].*
> *Male, 65+, Northern Ireland*

Case study: Maria[11] -Gave up due to financial burden

Maria is training to be a legal secretary. She earns less than £11,500 per year and struggles with debt problems. She lives with her three children.

Maria subscribes to broadband and a landline. She was given a laptop by a friend, but was unable to get it to connect to her wireless network. She asked her friend and her children

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[10] In this research we defined low income as earning £11,500 per annum or less.
[11] Case study based on the real experiences of a participant, whose name has been changed to protect anonymity.

to try to connect it, but they did not have any success either. She also has intermittent problems with the broadband being slow or cutting out.

"It just goes off quite a lot... last night it just wouldn't load up and then it said 'error'."

It would have been free for Maria to contact her supplier from her landline (which comes with the Broadband package), but her handset is broken and she cannot afford to replace it. Instead she called from her pay-as-you-go mobile, which cost her £6. She was unable to resolve the problem during that call, and as her credit ran low, she asked her supplier to call her back. She says they never did.

Maria describes herself as the type of person to kick up a fuss and to ask to speak to a manager, when she has problems with a service. But Maria cannot afford to pursue the issue, so is living with the problem.

"So I got through to [supplier] and then my credit went when I was on the phone with them, and they took my number and all that, but they just never rang back and that really done my head in... And then I'm back to square one again, because I haven't got the [landline] phone where it's free to phone, I have to use my mobile to phone them. And I've never rang them back since because I know my £10 will go."

Potential, unspecified cost of resolution can drive abandonment

Those on low incomes were also likely to be particularly risk averse when it was suggested they might have to pay for an engineer, if it was found the problem was with their wired connections/technology and not the service itself. They would therefore often stop trying to resolve a problem if faced with the potential cost of an engineer.