



# The Raphael Report

**Observations on marketing,  
advertising, sales and  
promotions  
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**Nov. 2006**

**Number 90**

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## Do the Right Thing

Life is certainly different where we live in the Northeast Kingdom of Vermont, a region of lovely vistas, incredibly cold winters, and not many trappings of what many people would call “civilized life.”

But even in this remote area we do have some run-ins with mighty corporations. I had one recently which made me question some of my assumptions about customer service. I had always thought:

- If business people are responsive, customers will be happy;
- If business people give customers choices, customers will be happy;
- If business people end up doing the right thing, customers will be happy.

Wrong.

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A business can be very responsive, give customers lots of choices and ultimately do the right thing and still alienate customers. I know I am one alienated customer. And I was treated fairly!

Part of my difficulty with Verizon Wireless lies in where we live. We just don't have that much experience with all the vagaries of cell phones. I know in most of the world, people spend most of their working day and a large part of their leisure time tethered to cell phones. They know all about ring tones, photos, calling plans and I bet they can even send emails and watch football games on their cell phones.

Up here, cell phones only work occasionally when you're more than five minutes out of town. They only work in town on good days when you're leaning the right way. We had one for emergencies but suddenly found ourselves dragged full-blown into the cell phone universe when our children had the audacity to head off to college.

Our children warned us it would be different when they joined the new universe of college life. So we waded our way through different plans, phones, rates, text message options, etc... and finally made most of the decisions.

We decided to become a Verizon Wireless family plan customer.

Except we couldn't make one final decision – how many minutes to sign up for. As you all know, minutes are a weird thing. You pay for some minutes, but others (calls to other Verizon customers, calls at night, calls at weekends) don't count against your paid-for minutes.

The choice seemed to boil down to \$80 a month for all our phones and 700 minutes and \$100 a month for all our phones and 1,400 minutes.

I couldn't make up my mind, but the helpful Verizon representative said just choose any option. I could always change the plan later.

As a converted Yankee, I chose the cheaper plan, and was rewarded when our minutes never went above 500 or so. We were being charged a few bucks extra for something called “text messaging” which I was told was a way to chat in class or make a social appointment. “Whatever,” as my kids would say.

Things went along somewhat swimmingly until our second child went off to college. Our bill went

up \$30 because we suddenly were speaking 900 minutes a month on our three phones and minutes over 700 were costing a whopping 40 cents apiece.

I panicked. Alarmed that our talking seemed to be on a gigantic upward spiral, I decided to call Verizon immediately and change the plan. After all, I was told when I signed up I could always change the plan.

The first representative was very polite and agreed to change the plan immediately. He did say our contract would be extended two years because of the change.

“Wait a minute,” I said with righteous indignation. “I was told I could change the plan whenever I wanted. I wasn’t told about any plan extension.”

The nice representative politely explained that the rules had changed in January. Hadn’t I received the update to my contract?

Out of the corner of my memory I remembered something in 4-point typeface from Verizon we had received. I just hadn’t had a magnifying glass handy to read the 20- page document.

I immediately did what all customers in my situation do when the blood rushes to the head and you are trying to hold onto rationality.

I asked to speak to a supervisor.

Normally the supervisors at Verizon Wireless (and I think many large corporations) are very willing to smooth over a rough situation. They can be the nice guys and make the customer happy. In general, customer service supervisors are as gentle as kittens.

Not this time.

I ended up with a pit bull of a woman who should have specialized in contract law instead of mad customers. She understood my situation immediately – I think she must have handled a lot of similar calls after Verizon Wireless changed its policy. I explained all I wanted to do was pay more money every month for more calling minutes. I just didn’t want to be obligated to spend two more years with Verizon.

After I had been lectured for several minutes, I hung up the phone to search for a wall to bang my head against.

I then calmed down and did what any marketer in my place would do.

I called public relations and very politely told the voice mail I was planning to write an article about my unpleasant situation with Verizon Wireless.

I got a call from the President’s office the very next day and I was treated like royalty. I was told there would be no contract extension and that I could change plans to my heart’s content in the future without any contract extensions. That representative was helpful, understanding, and a truly lovely person.

But I still feel alienated. I can’t wait until my contract is up to change wireless carriers.

Let’s look at the situation objectively.

Verizon Wireless was probably correct legally to change their contract with me. In the end, they gave me exactly what I wanted without any penalties. But I’m still upset. Am I being ridiculous?

I think not. There are lessons for all of us business people in this situation. Here is what I have learned:

- Customer service representatives should give the customer the benefit of the doubt right away. Don’t argue with the customer. At worst, say you’ll look into the situation and offer to call back. This defuses the situation.

- Training, training, training. Make sure front line employees recognize that they are the most important link in customer service. Give front line employees the latitude to break the rules for the customer’s advantage. In my case, all I was asking was the opportunity to pay more money every month for more minutes. Given that I thought I could change my contract at will, did it really hurt Verizon Wireless that much to keep my same expiration date? It’s a question of losing me as customer in the long run versus bending a rule.

- Win the customer, not the argument. That's the title of our friend Don Gallegos' new book and it should be the mantra for every business in America. Think about customers in terms of their lifetime value to your business, and you'll handle their problems differently, and with much greater success.

In the end, Verizon Wireless did not do anything wrong in handling me. They treated me respectfully, pointed out where I was wrong, and they eventually gave in and let me do what I wanted to do.

But in the end, it's not just about treating customers fairly. It's about making customers feel like you really care about them.

You have to get it right. Right away.