

Dear Diary: It's been 184 days since Sue Elliott signed up for broadband...

Sue Elliott, Vanguard Communications
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So the government is not taking any action to unbundle the local loop and make broadband services more readily available to New Zealand consumers. As a result, we're falling behind less developed countries in terms of high speed internet access. That's especially true because of the snail's pace at which installations seem to be available.

I've wanted high speed access for my home office for some time, but several factors made the matter increasingly important. A colleague was scheduled to visit, and needed access to complete some research he was doing. More critically, I'm scheduled to host an international web seminar this August. I have to get high speed access before then.

I worked with both Telecom and TelstraClear to try to get this accomplished. Here's how the saga of my broadband connection unfolded:

October 20, 2003: Alec's arriving in late November. He's used to high speed access and will need it for his work. I live close to the centre of Wellington, so this will be easy. Telstra has a good deal on offer. I'll contact them.

October 22: After waiting on hold for over half an hour, Telstra tells me that my address doesn't exist! But they will send someone out for a site visit, and if my house is serviceable, I'll have broadband installed within about two weeks.

November 10: After many telephone calls and many queues Telstra is still assuring me that the order is being processed. But the promised site visit still has not happened.

November 18: Alec arrived this morning. No service, no site visit, no calls from Telstra.

December 5: Alec has left. I'm scheduled to leave for an overseas trip soon. I call Telstra to cancel the order. Telstra tells me that the job has already been cancelled some weeks before. I am amazed – it hadn't been cancelled by me and I certainly hadn't been informed.

April 23, 2004: I have a web seminar coming up in August, so let me try again for this high speed access. I price the options with both Telstra and Telecom and decide to sign up for the Telecom plan online. After I finish entering all my data, the site crashes. I try to call up to see if they had received the information. After navigating a series of menus and waiting in queue for over 20 minutes I give up.

April 26: Giving up on Telecom, I try Telstra again, and use their new "callback" feature. On this occasion they call me back within the hour. I sign up, and am told that yes, this time, they do have a record of my house on their system and that the service will be installed within a week. They promise me the installers will contact me within 24 hours.

April 30: Several more calls from me to check on progress; nothing from Telstra.

May 1: Telstra has gone missing. Still nothing. I decide to call Telecom and see what my options there are. Since they don't have to install cables, perhaps it might be faster. I let them know that I need the service urgently. After spending 45 minutes taking my details they quote an install date over three weeks away. As this is later than the new date Telstra is promising me I decide to stick with Telstra.

May 11: It's now been over three weeks since the most recent sign-up with Telstra. I've had many frustrating phone calls, all initiated by me. Today, I find out that the job was cancelled late last week. Another cancellation, again not be me! I escalate the query.

May 12: I am now dealing with a team leader and a national manager who manages the contractors. They both assure me they are on the case.

May 14: I find out that Telstra have now requested plans from the council to prepare for the cable installation. This initial step will take up to another week. They hope there will be no problems as they "do not have a job number for this request". They tell me they will keep me informed and that they will make it happen.

Do I believe I will have broadband soon? Stay tuned! The real frustration is that because there is no true competition, I daren't cancel.

Why do we New Zealanders have to tolerate such poor levels of service from our telecommunications providers? Why do I need to deal with a national manager and a team leader to get traction? How can they cancel a contract without talking to the customer? How can they break so many promises?

I guess I should contact both Telstra and Telecom and see if I can work with them to improve their customer service processes — but I don't have the spare time to hang on the phone long enough.

Any feedback will be gratefully received — but zip it, I'm still on dial up!

Postscript June 8: Broadband is now in place (after many more missteps, broken promises, etc) I also have the benefit of a hole in the pavement outside the house, a modem that's incompatible with a standard wireless LAN, and a hole in the carpet in the study.

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