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## CALL IT A COMEBACK

Once the standard-bearer for poor customer experience, Comcast Corp. is implementing an organizationwide transformation to put the consumer first.

By Novid Parsi

**“T**he worst company in America.” Is it possible to recover from such a label? *Consumer Reports* subsidiary *Consumerist* did not mince words when it gave Comcast Corp. that title in 2014. But since then, Comcast’s aggressive change agenda has shown that a turnaround is possible—with the right leadership and focus.

The Philadelphia-based company—one of the world’s largest media companies and the United States’ largest cable and internet provider—has suffered a plethora of customer service-related fails over the past few years. In July 2014, for example, an 18-minute recording of a Comcast phone representative repeatedly refusing to cancel a customer’s cable and internet service went viral.

Less than a year later, the company’s planned merger with rival Time Warner Cable collapsed as it became clear the U.S. Justice Department and the Federal Communications Commission were leery of the deal. Both companies’ subpar customer service records were speculated to be a cause of the deal’s failure.

And then the 2015 American Customer Service Index (ACSI) reported Comcast’s overall customer satisfaction rating had dropped 10 percent, making it one of the nation’s worst-ranked telecommunications companies.

All signs pointed to a systematic customer experience failure. The company had seen the writing on the wall in late 2014. So it turned to its then-vice president for product design and development, Charlie Herrin, with a daunting task: Partner with leaders across all business units, including customer service, technical operations, sales, marketing, training and development, and product innovation, to reimagine the customer experience and ensure the company is delighting customers at every touch point.

“We decided that customer experience has to be one of our core operating principles,” says Mr. Herrin, who was named executive vice president of customer experience in September 2014. “Our products allow businesses to grow, they help kids get homework done, they provide families with entertainment and they allow people to find out about the world. We want to make sure that product experience is matched with good service and support.”

### LISTEN BEFORE YOU LEAP

To execute a transformation of such magnitude, Mr. Herrin started from the headspace he knows best. “When I was in products, I always thought about the product



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—Charlie Herrin, executive vice president of customer experience, Comcast Corp.

in an extremely personal way,” he says. “I never thought of it as a widget I was selling. The theme for my product team was ‘We’re here to change people’s lives,’ and I truly believe that. As I went into customer experience, it was very similar. The idea that good service and support should go along with the product experience was always very natural for me.”

As he looked to solve Comcast’s customer experience problem, Mr. Herrin’s first step was to identify customers’ needs and the basic problems that had to be solved.

That meant learning everything he could by surveying and holding focus groups with more than 40,000 customers, as reported by Slate. Out of those focus groups came five primary journeys that Mr. Herrin felt needed to be addressed to move the needle on customer experience: billing, onboarding, repair, reliability, and people and culture.

“The way I view it, customer service is really what happens when the experience breaks,” Mr. Herrin told Slate. “We’re looking at the end-to-end, from reliability to the in-store experience to the out-of-box experience to the in-home technician experience across the board. Because we really feel like fixing the upstream experience—that’s my job and the customer service, yes, there are things to do to make it better, but that’s sort of what happens when you don’t do the first part right.”

Upstream changes have included hiring hundreds of technicians—with plans to hire 5,500 customer service employees over the next few years—and simplifying bills. To transform the people and the culture, Mr. Herrin took a four-pronged approach:

1. Engage employees—especially on the front lines.
2. Automate certain manual service components so customers can resolve issues without always having to contact Comcast.
3. Identify and fix the sources of the breakdowns in customer experience, such as product reliability.

## QUICK HITS

**The Challenge:** A series of high-profile missteps and sinking customer satisfaction numbers shed a particularly bright light on Comcast Corp.’s long-standing customer service failures.

**The Plan:** Charlie Herrin, Comcast’s executive vice president of customer experience, led a companywide transformation to reimagine the customer experience and ensure customers are delighted at each touch point.

**The Execution:** The transformation focused on four key areas: raising employee engagement, automating services, identifying and fixing customer service breakdowns and implementing an external measure of customer satisfaction.

**The Result:** Comcast has seen a 7 percent improvement in the resolution of issues the first time a customer calls, as well as a 6 percent reduction in repeat technician visits within 30 days after a house call. At the same time, its American Customer Service Index customer satisfaction scores improved by 15 percent in the pay-TV category and 5 percent in the high-speed internet category.

4. Implement a meaningful customer satisfaction metric based on customers’ responses.

In May 2015, Comcast announced an incremental \$300 million program that would address all four areas—and ultimately transform its customer service. The biggest challenge has been figuring out which projects to tackle first.

“We knew we needed to focus in order to be successful, so we took a research-based approach to make sure we were using our customers’ feedback and prioritizing the areas where they wanted to see changes the most,” Mr. Herrin says. “We also wanted to start with projects that would have the most impact in the shortest amount of time.”

## TOP-TO-BOTTOM BUY-IN

Steering such a sharp turn would have been an exercise in futility without full buy-in from employees. And while the improvement efforts were not met with resistance—everyone from senior leaders to front-line employees understands what a huge priority this is, Mr. Herrin says—he did spend a lot of time rallying people to the cause. Mr. Herrin and other company leaders spoke frequently and passionately to help the staff understand how Comcast’s services and products make a difference in people’s lives. “If people believe their work is important, they can do anything,” he says. “With a big cultural shift like this, you have to maintain consistent communication with employees.”

That messaging was reinforced via training. Since 2015, Comcast has held 6,000 peer-led customer experience training sessions reaching nearly 80,000 employees, from the front line to senior management. All sessions stressed what amounted to the initiative’s mantra: “Make customer experience our best product.”

“At first, the training was a lot about why customer experience is really important and how we need to support each other as



a team,” Mr. Herrin says. “I think it’s really important to get the entire company on the same page in terms of why we’re doing this. A lot of the training is really around setting the tone and the expectation with the entire company that customer service is something we’re going to be good at.”

From there, training sessions drilled down into specifics. For example, they focused on how to use some of the new customer self-help tools and how the introduction of the Net Promoter Score (NPS) system would change employees’ responsibilities.

“There’s a drumbeat around these improvements,” Mr. Herrin says. “And the employees need to be knowledgeable about them because the customers are seeing them in the ads.”

### RESPECT THE CUSTOMER’S TIME

With employees aligned around the new vision, Mr. Herrin zeroed in on developing customer-centric tools and services—all with one goal in mind. “The overarching theme is respecting the customer’s time,” he says.

For ideas on what changes to make, Mr. Herrin went outside of the telecommunications industry. His reasoning: “Customer expectations are often set outside one’s industry.”

For example, Mr. Herrin learned from the financial services and insurance industries about how they created a better digital and mobile experience for their customers. He learned from the hospitality industry, including top hotels, about how they engaged their employees to become true brand ambassadors. And he learned from retail how to build a better brick-and-mortar experience.

To bolster the digital experience, Mr. Herrin’s team developed new features for Comcast’s customer service app and website My Account to automate support features that in the past would have involved a call to customer service. If customers do want



Customers can learn about Comcast’s product lines in the revamped stores.

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—Charlie Herrin

to speak directly with a representative, the revamped My Account app and website allow them to schedule a time for a rep to call them, cutting down on long hold times (which inevitably lead to customer frustration).

“It’s all about being on customers’ platform of choice and putting control in their hands,” Mr. Herrin says.

Mr. Herrin and his team also made tweaks to the in-person customer experience. For example, Comcast had always given customers a four-hour window to wait for a technician to arrive. Now, the company has narrowed that window down to two hours, with over 97 percent of technicians arriving on time. (And if they do not, Comcast automatically gives the customer \$20 in credit.)

The company also revamped its stores. In the past, they were functional spaces where customers waited in line to pay their bills or return equipment. “Now, it’s much more like a wireless store where you can learn about our product lines,” Mr. Herrin says. “We made the stores more like experience centers, like a true retail environment.” So far, Comcast has rebuilt 180 of its 500 stores.

### DIRECT ENGAGEMENT

All of these efforts would be for naught



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—Charlie Herrin to Slate

The company has also tripled the size of its social media team, thus improving its response time to mentions of Comcast by 95 percent. “More and more customers go to social channels to voice their displeasure or to look for a solution,” Mr. Herrin says. The social team interacts directly with customers on platforms including Facebook, Twitter and Reddit.

As a result of its customer experience transformation, Comcast has seen a 7 percent improvement in the resolution of issues the first time a customer calls, as well as a 6 percent reduction in repeat technician visits within 30 days after a house call. In June 2016, less than two years after Mr. Herrin took the customer service reins, Comcast’s customer satisfaction scores measured by ACSI improved by 15 percent in the pay-TV category and 5 percent in the high-speed internet category.

Mr. Herrin is not one to rest on these laurels, however. “We know we’ve made good progress, but we’ve got a lot of work to do,” he says.

One goal still on the horizon: making Comcast’s customer service less reactive. “The hallmark of great customer service is anticipating customer needs,” Mr. Herrin says. So, for instance, if the company notices a customer having trouble with a device, a representative could reach out to resolve it before a minor irritation becomes a major problem.

Still, Mr. Herrin’s accomplishments have armed him with lessons learned for other executives facing a similar road: “It’s gonna take some bravery, it’s gonna take a lot of transparency, some risk-taking. If you’re going about a transformation and you’re not uncomfortable, you’re probably not doing enough or doing it right.” **IQ**

without a tool in place to measure customer satisfaction, Mr. Herrin says. That is why he implemented the NPS (read more about the tool on page 54). It determines brand loyalty by asking customers a single question: How likely are you to recommend this company to friends or colleagues, on a scale from 0 to 10?

“When I talk to other executives thinking about [NPS] or starting to go through this change, they don’t always see the benefit of it,” Mr. Herrin says. “They’re still stuck in looking at their own operational metrics. Be very honest with how your customers see you; that’s the reality. It’s not your operational metrics—it’s what your customers think about the experience they have.”

But Comcast does more than just collect scores. Employees call customers back to better understand the experience behind the score—and not just unhappy people. Then, in daily huddles, employees discuss feedback with one another and senior management. “[Front-line employees] now have a direct feedback line to senior management and to product teams about how they can make the customer experience better,” Mr. Herrin says. “It’s a continuous learning environment.”