

Free broadband causes call-centre nightmare for customers

TalkTalk struggles to cope

PHONE COMPANIES

Carphone Warehouse customer service has been chaotic following the launch of free broadband this spring.

The company offers home phone and broadband services under the TalkTalk brand, but we've heard of a string of problems from billing errors to email services not working. Complaints centre around not being able to get through to someone who can fix the problem.

In April, the Carphone Warehouse launched free broadband. Customers who sign up to the £20 a month Talk 3 call package including line rental receive free broadband, although only if their phone line is connected to an upgraded exchange.

Adrian Simmonds signed up for the deal in March and has since experienced several problems, including not being able to

'We've been caught out by high demand'

receive emails. He told us: 'When I try calling the customer-service number, I go through the options then get the message "We're too busy, ring back later" and the line goes dead. If you email, you just get a reply saying "We can't call you back so please call us", but the number it gives is the very number you're complaining about.'

We put these complaints to the company. It said: 'We've been caught out by unexpectedly high demand for TalkTalk's free broadband but have been recruiting call-centre staff since June to cope with this. We're confident we've turned a corner and things are getting better every day.'

See p26 for more on phone companies.



Adrian Simmonds contacted us in despair about TalkTalk



The plans will cut goods in landfill

New centres for recycling electrical goods

RECYCLING

From next summer shops will have to take back your old toasters, laptops and washing machines when you buy a new electrical or electronic product.

The shops will either have to do this by taking the goods back in store or by joining a network of recycling facilities across the UK where shoppers can leave their goods free of charge.

The move has been announced as part of government plans to ensure that the UK complies with the Waste Electrical and Electronic Equipment (WEEE) Directive.

It was drawn up in 2003 to deal with the million tonnes of white and electronic goods dumped in landfill sites each year. But implementation in the UK has been plagued by delays and objections from the electronics and consumer goods industry.

The Department for Trade and Industry said that local retailers can charge customers if they disconnect and transport old goods. If you take goods for disposal yourself, the service will be free.

Distance sellers – such as catalogues and websites – will have to ensure goods are collected from the shopper free of charge or provide them with a local collection facility.

TAKE ACTION!
Find your recycling centre
■ Contact your local authority for details of the recycling centres in your area

TAKE ACTION!

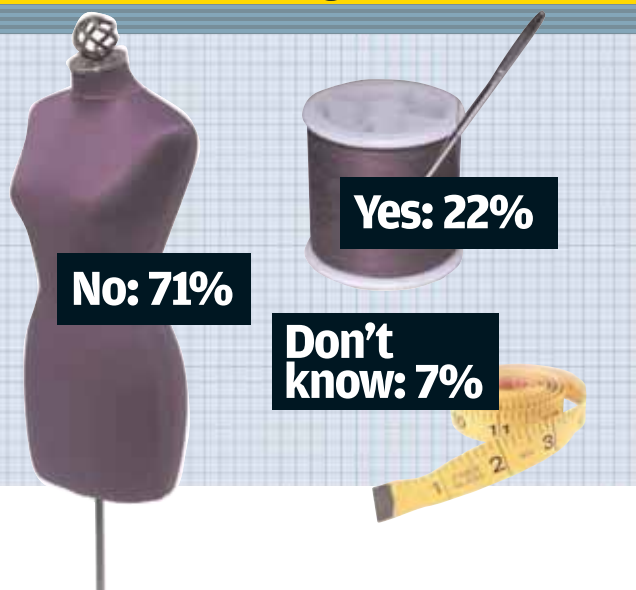
How to solve a problem

■ Call TalkTalk customer service on 0870 444 1820, or try its head office on 020 8896 5000. If you get nowhere, dispute resolution service Otelio on 01925 430 049 may be able to help after 12 weeks.

Public vote Ethical clothing

A recent survey by TNS Worldpanel Fashion has found that most under-25s don't care how their clothes are produced. We asked: When it comes to buying clothes, do you take into account the ethical policy of the company that makes them?

Survey of 1,067 adults carried out online for Which? by Explorandum between 14 and 16 August. Findings don't necessarily represent our views



Which? withdraws support for home information packs

Government ditches survey from Hips

BUYING A HOME

Plans to simplify the home-buying process were dealt a devastating blow when the government decided to abandon a key element of its scheme this summer.

Home information packs (Hips) were to provide prospective buyers with a file of information about a house upfront. The scheme has not been scrapped but plans to include a home condition report, an independent survey to help prevent the sale from falling through, have been shelved.

Which? has withdrawn its support for the scheme but home buyers in England and Wales will still have to prepare a Hip come June 2007.

The government's move, prompted by pressure from mortgage lenders and estate agents, has left home buyers with a 'half Hip', which will be of little use to buyers but will still cost around £500 – about £200 less than it would have with the home survey. In addition, the government U-turn has left many confused over what a Hip will include.

A new Hip should contain a sale statement, copies of the title document, standard searches and an energy performance certificate. If the property is leasehold, you'll need a copy of the lease, details of the managing agent, service charges, warranties and guarantees, and a fixtures and fitting list.

These documents are already needed for the buying process, but normally after the sale is agreed. Only the energy performance certificate, which will rate your home's energy efficiency, is new. Homes will be rated A to G, similar to fridge ratings. There will also be a list of measures to cut fuel bills and carbon emissions. This part of the pack is driven by EU rules which make energy inspections compulsory by 2009.

Many companies still plan to offer a Hip service, so you'll be able to pay someone



The home survey is no longer in the packs

else to collect the information. If you sell your home privately and don't have a Hip, you'll be fined £200 a day from the day your home goes on the market. If an estate agent is marketing your property for you, but without a Hip, it will be liable for the fine.

Nick Stace, Director of Campaigns and Communications at Which?, said: 'The government has swallowed the Hips hype and by excluding the home condition report has effectively rendered the new scheme redundant. The new "half Hip" will be a useless but very expensive waste of time.'

'The new "half Hip" will be a useless but very expensive waste of time'

TAKE ACTION!

Buying a new Hip

■ For more information on Hips see www.communities.gov.uk. To find someone to prepare a Hip for you visit www.hipassociation.co.uk/members.aspx or call the organisation on 0870 950 7739.

Which? highlights problems with British Gas Click Energy

Liz Edwards tackles the 'paperless' tariff that sends bills by post



This month customers of British Gas will be hit by the year's second price hike. As it revealed the first

rise earlier this year, it launched its cut-price tariff Click Energy, to persuade people to stay.

But the results, according to one customer, Jane Ridgway, were a shambles.

The idea behind Click was to cut costs by doing everything online – viewing bills, contacting customer services and submitting readings.

But despite registering for Click and its paperless bills, Jane couldn't access her bill online, got nowhere trying to email customer services, and when a bill did arrive – in the post – she was on the old rate. Staff told Jane that there was an email backlog of three weeks and that the system couldn't yet cope with paperless bills.

Since the deal is that Click subscribers should not need to phone, after a four-week grace period they have to call a premium-rate number to get in touch. But the number was hard to find.

When we called British Gas customer services to ask for the Click number, we were told there wasn't one. When we asked its press office for the rate, it couldn't tell us until pressed (it's 75p a minute). After our calls it put it on its site.

Jane told us: 'I don't think it's fair that customers have to pay this to call and sort out problems which are British Gas' fault.'

To be fair, when Jane complained, her calls were refunded. And when we complained, she got £30 as goodwill. British Gas admits there were problems but has taken on more staff.

Tell us if it's made a difference via news@which.co.uk