

# Modem, Schmodem. I Blew a Fuse.

## A New Internet Service, One of Life's Indignities

By RICH PLISKIN

**J**UST as the joyous events in life help us mark the passage of time, tragedies, too, take their place on our calendars of memory: Being divorced. Losing a kidney. Having a new Internet Service Provider foisted on you just when everything else seemed to be going tolerably well.

By that rule, I will remember these recent weeks as the Spring of My Customer Service Crisis.

In this part of Central Jersey, a company that goes by the flaggy name of Patriot Media recently succeeded RSN as cable Internet Service Provider. If Patriot sees itself as keeper of the national modem, then I regret that I have but one aneurysm to give to harassing it.

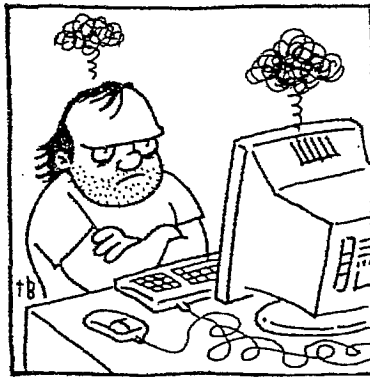
Two important things happen during a forced transition from one I.S.P. to another. The first is a sudden, chronic loss of Internet service. The other is a modest erosion of customer service, which, consistent with cable industry practice, was atrocious to begin with and would hardly be noticed but for the accompanying modest rate increase.

As a result, victims of I.S.P. transition move through what experts call the Five Stages of Sadness: fulminating rage; sputtering fulmination; humiliating sputtering; abject humiliation; and pitiable, pathetic resignation. It is in this last stage that the modest rate increase arrives.

These are more than laws of economics. They are conditions of life, akin to the unknowability of God, gender confusion or baldness. You just have to live with it. Trying to fix things just makes them worse.

To be fair, I acknowledge that I suffer from a personality disorder that inhibits me from behaving maturely toward customer service representatives generally. Many companies, across industries, have the audiotapes of our phone conversations to prove this, so there's no point in dissembling.

I do not care to examine why this is so or what it says about me. I certainly don't care to overcome the



Tom Bloom

condition. I believe that accepting our flaws can be as liberating as correcting them. This philosophy seems to work well for the cable industry, too.

• From my I.S.P.'s corporate mission statement, as shown on the official Montgomery Township municipal Web site:

- Take care of our customers.
- Do what we say we are going to do.
- Make it fun for our customers and employees.

From my mission statement, as shown on page after page of journal entries made in an unsteady hand:

- Parade in front of company headquarters draped in a sandwich board declaiming corporate arrogance.

- Sue over the \$10 credit given for last month's loss of service, which I believe should have been \$13.50 instead.

The company knows I will never actually parade in front of corporate headquarters with a sandwich board, or that I will sue for the disputed \$3.50. It knows that I would not even know where to get a sandwich board. And it knows that someone of my temperament could not hope to find a licensed lawyer willing to work with me, regardless of the potential payoff.

I don't know how the company knows these things, but I suspect it is related in some way to the buying and selling of customer lists by direct marketers. After I defeat the I.S.P., I intend to prove this.

I may never prove this.

Appalling service from the cable company is nothing new. But it is worth noting that in New Jersey, the

state in which the electric light, Morse Code and the telegraph were invented, you get more sophisticated service at the gas station than at the modem. At some service stations, you don't even have to sign the credit card receipt. That's high-tech.

Do I overstate the case? Of course. The truth is, there were only a few days during the transition when I was unable to log on. A few harassing phone calls to the chief executive's secretary, some anonymous, criminally threatening e-mails to the head of corporate operations from untraceable public computers — and I was back online.

Yes, I must first power down the PC; unplug every outlet in the neighborhood; reboot; and sing "Tura, Lura Lura (That's an Irish Lullaby)" in a proto-Mandarin dialect. This embarrasses the children when friends are over, but for Internet service, it's worth their humiliation.

Besides, the sooner they learn that Internet service is not a right but a corporate dispensation, the better customers they'll be.