

THE ROANOKE TIMES

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## CASEY: Dish Network customers can't get connected with satellite TV service

By Dan Casey

No doubt you've heard of Dish Network, the Colorado-based satellite TV subscription service. It and a competitor — DirecTV — offer cable-television channels wirelessly. Many of their customers live beyond the reach of local cable TV systems.

It's unclear how many subscribers Dish Network has in the Roanoke and New River valleys. Recently, I've become somewhat acquainted with two. One is Betty Turner of Glenvar. The other is Joyce Kasey of Roanoke.

Both want to quit their monthly Dish Network subscriptions. Both have been trying to contact the satellite service for more than a month, by every means they can divine. Those efforts got stymied at every turn.

Independently of each other, they turned to yours truly. Legitimately or not, I have a rep for being able to help aggrieved consumers in such situations.

Tom Turner (Betty's son) reached out first. His mom and dad, Ned Turner, recently moved from Christiansburg to Glenvar. One of the final pieces of that move was canceling their Dish Network subscription.

### **Hourslong waits on hold**

Tom Turner wrote me a few emails about Betty's attempts last weekend. Here's the first:

"Longtime reader here. I could use your help. My mom and dad are downsizing their home and relocating. The problem is, we cannot contact Dish Network to cancel their TV/Internet service at their old home in Christiansburg.

"You cannot do this online ... only over the phone," Turner's email went on. Dish Network's "website has messages about some sort of online breach and customer service outages. My mom has been trying for a month. I tried today on 3 separate [calls].

"I was told that there was a 7 minute wait, then stayed on hold for an hour. Later in the day, I was offered a 94-minute wait and a 103-minute wait. I called this evening and was dropped after the wait warning.

All we want to do is cancel the service. Thanks for your attention!"

Then last week, I got a phone call from Joyce Kasey. She left a voicemail message, "If you need another complaint about the Dish Network, I can fill you in on the details."

It sounded like she was aware about Turner's complaint. But when I called and asked, Kasey wasn't. She assumed thousands of Dish Network subscribers were unhappy for the same reason she was: An inability to get hold of the company. And she figured, rightly, that some were reaching out to me.

## **15 calls in one month**

Kasey said she'd been trying to contact Dish for more than a month, and estimated she'd made 15 calls in that time. On the only occasion she reached a live person — after sending two hours on hold, the Dish rep “said they couldn't hear me,” Kasey said.

She made those calls on her cellphone. And whenever she was warned she'd have to hold for a spell, Kasey did. She'd put her cellphone down then plugged it into its charger so the juice wouldn't run out. One time, Kasey said, she left her phone on hold for five hours but was unable to connect.

“If no one can contact them, they should have a substitute number for customers to call,” Kasey told me.

Wednesday by email, I reached out to the company's media desk, at [news@dish.com](mailto:news@dish.com). And I copied two different Dish Network customer service executives, too, names drawn from the company's website.

The email outlined Turner's and Kasey's complaints, their Dish account numbers, addresses and more. It asked for a reply by the end of the day Thursday.

When I'd got none by Friday morning, I resent the email with a few additional details. And the second time, I added two additional Dish executives to the CC line, for a total of four execs copied. That one elicited no response, either.

However, on Thursday morning, Kasey received a call from Dish, and the rep who contacted her was able to get her account canceled. As of Friday afternoon, nobody had contacted Turner or me.

That's unusual for large corporations, which generally respond to media quickly, to find out why they may be cropping up in the news. Naturally, companies want to protect their reputations, and usually they also want to get in front of upcoming articles.

## **Ransomware hackers strike**

Then I started to do a little more digging into Dish.

I hit pay dirt on the website of the Better Business Bureau in Englewood, Colorado, which is where Dish Network is based. The website features 3,200 complaints about Dish Network in the past three years and more than 1,000 in the past 12 months.

Many are quite recent. A common theme was an inability to contact Dish Network.

BBB allows companies to respond in writing to complaints, and its website displays those responses, with personal information redacted.

A number of the company's replies to the BBB suggest Dish Network is in the middle of a crisis.

One, dated March 21, tells the story. The company suffered a cyberattack in February. Other news accounts described it as a “ransomware” attack, in which hackers typically lock a corporation out of its own computer systems, then demand payments to restore critical services.

“On February 23, 2023, we experienced a cybersecurity incident that has affected some of our internal communications, customer call centers, and internet sites. We immediately activated our incident response and business continuity plans to contain, assess, and remediate the situation. Cybersecurity experts and outside advisors were retained to assist in the evaluation of the situation, and we notified appropriate law enforcement authorities.

“Because of this incident, some of our customers are having trouble reaching our service desks, accessing their accounts, and making payments. Please know we are working as quickly as we can to address these and any other service-related issues. DISH TV customers can now make a payment through a secure payment form on our website.

“We also continue to increase our call center capacity and social media response capabilities. We have more agents helping customers every day. . . . Working to restore all of our customer experiences is a top priority, but it will take a little time before things are fully restored.

“. . . We’re sorry for the inconvenience and thank you for your patience.”

That’s the most I expect to get out of Dish.

I also checked the company’s stock price. One year ago, that was just under \$31 per share. Friday afternoon, Dish Network was trading for \$8.60. The share price has tumbled 72% in the past 12 months. Percentage-wise, that’s more than Bitcoin has dropped year-over-year.

All of which suggests if you’re a Dish subscriber and you’re trying to get hold of the company, you may be out of luck, at least for a while.

Or perhaps you can reach them via the Better Business Bureau chapter in Englewood, Colorado. That outfit seems to be able to get Dish Network’s attention.

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THE ROANOKE TIMES

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CASEY: Cruise operator denies Roanoke family’s plea for \$58,300 refund

By Dan Casey

Last year, William “Kip” Thompson and his wife, Beni, began planning “the vacation of a lifetime.” It would be for themselves and their five offspring, the youngest of whom is 15.

Soon, the south Roanoke couple will have four in college at the same time, yikes. They figured summer 2023 would be their last chance in years to have an all-in-the-family vacation.

So they splurged. They booked a seven-day Alaska cruise package, in a luxurious three-bedroom suite, aboard the Norwegian Jewel. The package included five days of post-cruise land travel in Alaska, as well as air travel for all seven Thompsons.

They booked it through Norwegian Cruise Line, a well known Florida-based cruise operator. The trip's cost was \$60,619.17. Kip Thompson, a local eye surgeon, paid that fully five months in advance.

Some weeks before they were to leave, NCL sent the Thompsons their itinerary, including flights. Beni Thompson noticed a potential hitch almost immediately. They were flying on the same day they were supposed to board the Jewel. That made her nervous.

She said she contacted Norwegian Cruise Line twice by phone about that specific concern.

"Everything I've ever seen about cruises said, never travel on the same day you're boarding a ship," because of the potential for airline delays, Beni Thompson told me. She mentioned that to the NCL representatives as well.

Both reps assured her the family would make it to Vancouver in time, because "we were leaving on the first flight of the day and hardly anything ever goes wrong with those," Beni told me. As a result, the family stuck with the original flights booked by Norwegian.

The big travel day was June 28. Early that morning, the Thompsons were to board a Delta flight in Greensboro that would fly them to Atlanta. There, they'd catch a connecting Delta flight to Vancouver, British Columbia, where the Norwegian Jewel would leave its dock at 4 p.m PDT.

The Thompson's first flight was scheduled to leave Greensboro at 5:41 a.m. The Thompsons were at the airport, but that airliner didn't take off. The flight was canceled because its crew, which had been delayed flying into Greensboro the night before, lacked the minimum number of required rest hours to fly early that morning to Atlanta, Kip Thompson told me.

The Thompsons called NCL. A rep informed them the cruise line could not rebook them on flights that would get them to Vancouver on time. The family should work with Delta, to see if there was another way to get them to Canada, NCL told them.

### **American flight to Seattle?**

According to Delta, there was a possibility.

Delta booked the family on an American Airlines flight from Charlotte that was supposed to arrive in Seattle shortly after noon. Then they could catch a short Delta flight to Vancouver, and make it to the Jewel on time. But it would be tight.

So the Thompsons hurriedly drove 90 minutes from the Greensboro airport to Charlotte, where they caught the American flight to Seattle. Unfortunately, it was delayed by more than an hour.

The American flight landed in Seattle around 1:30 p.m. PDT. By then, their Delta flight to Vancouver had left its gate. (The two cities are roughly 140 miles apart.)

In desperation, the family tried to hire an Uber to Vancouver. But none of the three Uber drivers they contacted had passports — which the driver would need to get the family across the Canadian border.

Kip Thompson contacted NCL again. Was it possible they could board the Jewel at its first stop in Ketchikan, Alaska? Kip said NCL told him a rule prevented the family from boarding at any port other than Vancouver.

The land package portion of their vacation would not begin until the cruise ended seven days later. Thompson inquired whether there was any way his family could do that part of the trip.

NCL replied no. Thomson said he's never gotten a decent explanation as to why.

## **2-day summer-travel nightmare**

So on June 30 around 5:30 a.m., the Thompson clan landed home in Roanoke after a 48 very frustrating hours. They never took their planned Alaska trip-of-a-lifetime.

Shortly thereafter, Kip Thompson began asking Norwegian Cruise Line for a refund. He did that via email. Initially, an NCL "guest experience coordinator" sent Thompson a denial letter addressed to a different unhappy NCL customer, Monica DeGraff of Golden, Colorado. (This becomes noteworthy later in the narrative.)

Next, NCL sent Thompson a correctly addressed denial that was identical to DeGraff's — in other words, it was a form refund denial letter. Ultimately NCL offered Thompson \$2,500 back. That constituted some taxes and service charges for dining and beverages that Thompson had paid as part of his \$61,000 prepaid travel package.

Dissatisfied, Thompson escalated his refund request with the cruise operator. But that didn't do any good. The latest communication he received was Aug. 7 from Roger Farinas, the cruise operator's "guest experience supervisor."

"After a review of your case at length, we have determined that your concerns have been addressed in accordance with our policies," Farinas wrote Thompson. "While we are sorry to learn of your continued disappointment with our previous responses, our position in this matter remains firm."

I learned details about the botched vacation from the Thompsons last week. Tuesday, I wrote Katty Byrd, Norwegian Cruise Line's vice president of guest services, about the Thompsons' issues with NCL.

"It appears to me that Norwegian Cruise Line's policies have cost Dr. Thompson \$58,300, because of canceled flights that Norwegian booked and for which the Thompson family was on-time. It wasn't their fault the flight NCL arranged for them was canceled," I wrote Byrd.

"From that perspective, it seems less than fair that Dr. Thompson should have to eat that \$58,300. Am I looking at this the wrong way? If so, please tell me how and why."

## **Norwegian Cruise Line responds**

Byrd never replied. But Friday morning I received an unsigned email message from NCL's public relations department.

"Although Norwegian Cruise Line offers flight arrangements as part of our cruise package, we do not have direct control over the operations of the airlines and are not responsible for their cancelations,[sic]" the message said.

“Per our air policy terms and conditions, ‘If there are delays, cancelations, [sic] or any schedule changes within 72 hours of your departure time, you will need to work directly with your airline for re-accommodations. These changes are beyond the control of NCL.’

“Additionally, as a convenience to our guests we offer the option to deviate flights up to two days pre cruise, which the guest did not elect to do.”

(Weeks before their travel, Beni Thompson tried to persuade NCL to book her family on earlier flights. But the NCL reps pooh-poohed her concerns, and assured her flying a day earlier was unnecessary.)

NCL’s response continued: “The guest is ineligible for a full refund as they did not purchase travel insurance. It is because of unexpected situations, such as this, that we strongly recommend guests obtain travel protection insurance. Without travel protection, we are unable to provide an exception to our cancelation [sic] fee policy.”

Kip Thompson says he was offered travel insurance, by NCL, at the time he booked the cruise package. But he turned it down without inquiring as to the price.

That brings us back to Monica DeGraff, the other unhappy Norwegian Cruise Line traveler. Recall that when Thompson first asked NCL for a refund, the cruise operator replied to him with a letter addressed to DeGraff in Colorado.

NCL’s letter also denied her a refund for a different Norwegian cruise. So I called DeGraff and asked for her travel story. Turns out it was very similar to the Thompson’s nightmare.

### **She had trip-protection insurance**

DeGraff bought a 10-day cruise in Italy and Greece for herself, her teenage daughter and her mom aboard Norwegian’s Breakaway Voyage. That ship departed May 26 from Rome. Norwegian arranged their flights for the same day as the cruise’s departure.

The DeGraffs missed the cruise because a flight NCL booked them on from Toronto — the second leg of their air travel to Rome — was delayed. That plane didn’t arrive in Rome until the Breakaway Voyage already had left. The airliner was so late leaving Toronto that DeGraff and her family never got on it, because they knew they would miss the ship’s departure.

DeGraff had purchased trip-protection insurance offered by NCL as part of her vacation package. She told me it cost about \$200 per person. Though she later made a claim for \$11,000 (the amount she advanced for the missed cruise package) the insurance company denied it.

Instead, the insurer paid DeGraff, her mom and daughter \$500 each, the maximum coverage in the insurance policy for airline flight delays, DeGraff said. That paid for their flights back to Colorado, but not much else.

DeGraff told me she’s invested more than 50 hours trying to get an \$11,000 refund, or a credit for future travel, but she’s been stymied by NCL and the insurer that wrote the policy.

Collectively, the two families are out \$72,000 because they could not take cruise vacations with Norwegian Cruise Line because of delays with flights booked by the cruise operator.

Everyone reading this will draw their own conclusions from these sad stories. Here are a few:

First, I'll never book anything on Norwegian Cruise Line because its refund policies seem unfavorably skewed against its customers. (It would seem less frustrating to flush the money down a toilet. At least with that, there'd be no expectation of a vacation.)

Second, I'll never buy trip-protection insurance for a vacation unless I'm absolutely certain it'll fully cover my losses if the vacation doesn't happen because of airline delays. Those occur at every single airport, every single day. (In that respect, the policy Norwegian sold Monica DeGraff was almost worthless.)

Third, is the old saw about arriving at least a day early at the port of departure for any planned cruise. It's solid advice. I'll take that if I ever book a cruise.

We'll wrap this up with the last sentence from the final, four-paragraph form letters Kip Thompson and Monica DeGraff each received from Roger Farinas, Norwegian Cruise Line's guest operations supervisor. Here it is:

"It is our hope that over the course of time, you will consider Norwegian Cruise Line in your future travel plans," Farinas wrote to each.

Was he kidding?

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THE ROANOKE TIMES  
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CASEY: Amazon shuts down Roanoke area  
seller who marketed glass breakers for  
Teslas

By Dan Casey

Neil Aneja is a hustler and entrepreneur.

The 32-year-old Roanoker's first hustle, in 2013, came shortly after he earned a college degree in biology. He was renting a \$600 per month downtown Roanoke apartment back then. After a friend told Aneja about Airbnb, he began renting out nights in his leased apartment.

He discovered that two weekend rentals a month would cover his rent and earn him a profit. Any night he booked an Airbnb client into the apartment, Aneja would bunk across town with his mom, Shama Karkar.

Soon Aneja was leasing more apartments by the month — and re-renting them by the night on Airbnb. He parlayed that enterprise into owning a two-unit duplex in southeast Roanoke, then a 25-unit apartment building in southwest Roanoke. The latter is exclusively used for short-term rentals. Now that business has four full-time employees.

That's not the only enterprise. Aneja bought a Tesla Model 3 and a Hummer and offered them as daily rentals on Truro.com, an online peer-to-peer car rental business that works like Airbnb. He said he quit that enterprise after Truro changed its terms and began keeping a larger share of the revenue.

This year Aneja started another company, TangTeardrop.com. It markets lightweight, two-wheeled teardrop-style camping trailers one can tow behind a car.

The base price of a Tang Teardrop is \$15,000, but if you want it air conditioned and set up with solar power, it'll run at least \$16,350 – and more if you desire a shower, sink, refrigerator and gas stove.

Probably Aneja's most successful hustle has been marketing low-cost gimcracks and other items on Amazon.com. He began doing that in 2019. One of his best-selling wares is a small shelf that mounts to a shower wall with suction cups — and helps women shave their legs.

Aneja has a system to identify items people are searching to buy online. Then he finds a supplier for those items (usually in the Far East), buys them in bulk and has them shipped directly to Amazon, which holds the merchandise and reships the merchandise to buyers. Aneja never touches the stuff, and he said his profit margin is about 35%.

On Amazon, he's sold screens for espresso coffee makers; and silicone sleeves for cans of sparkling seltzer. The latter make the cans resemble non-alcoholic Red Bull, which is legal to drink in a park or on a beach. (Aneja's sleeve reads "Dead Bull.")

Another item Aneja sells is a device that allows bicycle owners to hide an air-tag on their bikes — to assist with recovery if a bike is stolen.

"In the summertime I can sell 100 of those a day," Aneja told me.

Some of the merchandise — such as the shower shelf, the can covers and the air-tag hidings — Aneja has patented, or he's applied for patents that are now pending. "The more intellectual property you have, the more your [Amazon] account is worth," Aneja said.

Yet another item/invention is a prank glitter-bomb device. Those cost Aneja \$1.70 each in bulk. He can sell them individually on Amazon for \$20.

This year, he said, he was on track to sell \$3 million in merchandise, which should've netted him \$1 million profit before taxes.

But Aneja's not selling anything on Amazon right now. His Amazon business is dead in the water. The online retailer summarily deactivated his account (and some others) in July. Amazon is currently holding onto 48,000 items of Aneja's inventory, which he estimated would sell for \$1.2 million. The company is also holding \$21,000 that was in his merchant account.

Why did they shut him down?

Aneja said it's because of another item he marketed through his Amazon account, a "Tesla Steering Wheel Glass Breaker for Tesla Model 3 and Y."

It was a hefty instrument that mounted to a car's steering wheel, ostensibly so a driver could bust out a window in an emergency. Aneja's account sold 2,000 of those on Amazon for \$49.95 each.



Then on July 7, the Washington Post published an article with the headline, “Tesla owners are using steering-wheel weights to drive hands-free.”

The story noted: “The devices, which aim to stop Tesla Autopilot from nagging drivers to put their hands on the wheel, have been criticized by regulators and safety experts.” The article cited two accidents that have occurred with Teslas outfitted with steering-wheel weights.

The weights fool a Tesla’s computer brain into thinking a human’s hands are on the wheel. But Aneja didn’t market the item that way. Rather, he sold them as steering-wheel mountable glass-breakers. He said his marketing materials featured warnings, such as “Do not use when a vehicle is moving.”

At 3 a.m. on the same day the Post article appeared, Amazon removed the glass-breaker from its listings.

Aneja said he wasn’t surprised, considering the unfavorable publicity. But 12 hours later, right around 3 p.m. the same day, Amazon sent Aneja another email. In the second email, they removed Aneja from Amazon.com.

“Your Amazon seller account has been permanently deactivated in accordance with section 3 of the Amazon Services Business Solutions Agreement. Your listings have been removed. Funds will not be transferred to you but will stay in your account while we work with you to address this issue.”

Not only was his account deactivated with no warning, the action seemed contrary to an email promise Amazon sent Aneja in November, when the company praised the “health” of the business he was doing through Amazon.

“Congratulations!” Amazon wrote him. “Because you’ve maintained a high Account Health Rating you’re now enrolled in Account Health Assurance. With Account Health Assurance, we will not deactivate your selling account provided you work with us to resolve any issues.”

Deactivating his account with no warning is exactly what Amazon did eight months later.

Ironically, Aneja has no glass-breakers left. He’s sold out of those. But Amazon is holding onto 48,000 other items — like koozies, shower shelves and glitter bombs — for which Aneja’s already paid and that already were delivered to Amazon.

He cannot sue the online retailer because he agreed when signing up to be an Amazon merchant that all disputes must go instead to arbitration. That typically takes a year, Aneja said. Meanwhile, Amazon is charging him \$15,000 to \$20,000 per month to park his inventory.

Aneja swore he didn’t market the glass breaker as anything intended to fool Tesla computers.

“It’s like selling a knife,” he told me. “Someone could use it for cooking, and they could also use it for a crime. You can’t control what the end user does with the product.”

I sent Amazon media relations an email Monday morning, asking why the online retailer had deactivated Aneja’s account. I didn’t receive a reply before deadline Monday evening.

Aneja has spent \$15,000 on lawyers since July 7 trying to get Amazon to reinstate his account.

“Our client’s product is a ‘glass breaker’ and was never sold or promoted as anything but a glass breaker,” Aneja’s lawyer, Ryan Gile of Las Vegas, Nevada, wrote Amazon Aug. 6. “As such, the Product listing does not violate Amazon’s terms of service.”

But neither that letter nor the glass-breaker’s 10 page material Safety Data Sheet that the lawyer also forwarded to Amazon has changed the company’s mind so far.

Amazon’s last communication to Aneja was Aug. 22 from Jorge H, in the company’s “Seller Escalation Team.” It was a response to a personal emailed plea Aneja sent to Amazon founder Jeff Bezos, requesting his account be reactivated.

“After reviewing your account and the information you provided, we have determined that your selling account will remain deactivated,” Jorge H. wrote. “Funds will not be transferred to you but will stay in your account while we work with you to address this issue in accordance with our ‘Funds withholding policy.’

“We reached this decision because you listed products that are not permitted for sale on Amazon.com and failed to submit evidence or documentation demonstrating that your account has not violated our ‘Restricted Products’ policy. If you have questions about this policy, go to ‘Restricted Products.’

Aneja said he’s been trying to work with Amazon, but he’s getting no traction with the company whatsoever. He believes he’s lost \$175,000 in profits since his account was deactivated.

And now, Aneja added, items that will fool Tesla’s Autopilot computer have popped up again on Amazon.com.

Go figure.

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