

Interview with Teresa Corbin

Telstra's Chief Customer Advocate

Teresa Corbin
Telstra Corporation Ltd

Robert Morsillo
RMIT University

Abstract: Teresa Corbin's name was synonymous for many years with consumer advocacy in Australian telecommunication in her role as CEO of Consumers' Telecommunications Network (CTN) from 2003 and Australian Communications Consumer Action Network (ACCAN) from 2010. In November 2021 Teresa joined Telstra Corporation Ltd as their Chief Customer Advocate. Here she speaks with Robert Morsillo about her new role, its opportunities and challenges, and how she sees Australian consumers engaging with telecommunications and the digital economy.

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Interview

This interview with Teresa Corbin, Telstra's Chief Customer Advocate, was conducted by Robert Morsillo via video conference on 27 November 2023.

[Morsillo] Thanks for your time, Teresa. It must have been a big change from working in a small not-for-profit community organisation to a large corporate. What has your experience been like?

[Corbin] Well, I would say that the first year was really fascinating, because what I expected was quite different to the reality. I had thought that people in large companies were driven by different things and must be interested in very different problems. However, even though obviously you're thinking about shareholders instead of members (when I was CEO at ACCAN [Australian Communications Consumer Action Network]), the problems and issues are not as vastly different as you think. The reality is still the same. We're still talking about limited resources and the same telecommunications environment, the same challenges for customers with vulnerable circumstances – none of that has changed. It's

just that you're working on the problems from a different angle. And even though you're now inside the telco you should be able to have the same if not better impact on what's happening. So, I guess it's my role that has shifted rather than the problems or issues having shifted. It's the way I engage with the problems or issues that is different.

[Morsillo] Only a few organisations in Australia have a Chief Customer Advocate or similar role. Why has Telstra decided to maintain such a function?

[Corbin] I'm not the first person in the role of Customer Advocate at Telstra, though Telstra is the first telecommunications provider in Australia to have such a position. When I was thinking about taking up the role and talking to people who set up the position, it was clear that Telstra already does an enormous number of things to listen to customers. The question is: what's missing in that existing mix? I think Telstra realised that they could do with having an independent perspective all the time, not just every three or six months when they're having a particular stakeholder meeting or when there is a set agenda to ask specific questions – but to be able to have issues raised independently on the fly while the company is dealing with and grappling with some really challenging matters. And so, it's probably just the next step along the line of how you listen most effectively to consumers and to customers. The banks have Customer Advocate roles, and the Royal Commission was a prompt. While telecommunications hasn't had that sort of inquiry, I think that everybody could see that there were some good things coming out of the fact that there were customer advocates in banking and financial services and that was something that Telstra could benefit from.

[Morsillo] Telstra has a very large customer base, including small businesses and large enterprises. How do you decide where to focus your efforts?

[Corbin] What we do is try to work out where we can have the most impact – and that means focussing on customers that are really struggling to stay connected. It aligns with Telstra's purpose “to build a connected future so everyone can thrive”. It's a focus on customers in vulnerable circumstances. Telstra has existing detailed advocacy and work going on internally in relation to People with a Disability and First Nations people – not just as customers but in relation to employees through our Accessibility Action Plan and Reconciliation Action Plan. And there's also been an enormous program with low-income measures for a long time. So, it's looking at where the gaps might be as new services and products get created and as some products get retired. What does the new environment look like and how do we make sure that the products and services meet the needs of customers? Rather than trying to pick out specific areas, we've tried to develop a strategy that provides a framework of fairness and inclusion, some overarching perspectives, and

then educate the business that this is the role of the Customer Advocate. If you think that something you're working on might raise questions that you are not sure of in this regard, come and talk to the Customer Advocate so that we can try and look at the issues before they become a problem. It's not just a question of addressing problems but trying to prevent problems as well.

[Morsillo] What are you seeing as the biggest issues for consumers of telecommunications services and digital platforms in Australia today?

[Corbin] Probably the one that we're most interested in, no surprise, is artificial intelligence (AI) and how that impacts on consumers' connectivity and digital capability. While we work on accessibility, availability and affordability, the truth is that if we haven't improved digital capability then none of those things matter. You kind of need to have all four addressed to ensure that people can stay adequately connected. And when I say adequately connected, we're not just talking about having a connection, you must have enough data and you must have the right kind of devices to access it. So, the complexity of these services is not reducing, and neither is the cost, even though the accessibility and availability are gradually improving. Going forward, we need to focus more on affordability and digital capability because the capabilities piece is constantly shifting. And AI has highlighted this all to us. The main issue is whether consumers can deal with the impacts of AI in all the apps and platforms that are using it. What does it mean for privacy? For online search? What's happening to your data that's for sale? You need to understand a lot more about how it all works to get what you need. And so that comes back full swing to capability. You may not need to know everything about digital, but you do need digital skills in whatever your sphere of life is, like accessing government services, or education, if that's where you are in your life or employment.

[Morsillo] What's a typical day-in-the-life of a Chief Customer Advocate look like?

[Corbin] Well, I spend a lot of time talking to various people who are working on lots of different things throughout the company. So, I get visibility of the enormous range and scope of the company, which can be quite a challenge when I think I was working in an organisation of 20 people previously, compared to more than 20,000 people now. So, on any day I'm grappling with scale, I'm grappling with how do I have impact amid such huge scale?

The other thing that I do that is important to my role is to spend as much time as I can on the front line by going to the Telstra stores, spending a day with a field services technician, and visiting contact centres. It's useful for me to understand how Telstra's systems and processes work with the staff that are providing services to our customers. The other thing

I do spend a lot of time talking to our stakeholders: consumer representatives, charities, organisations that are supporting the type of customers that I'm worried about staying connected and understanding what the trends are that they're seeing. And then, last but by no means least, I spend a lot of time engaging with the senior leadership at Telstra to talk through what I'm seeing, what I think are really important issues that they need to be across and aware of.

[Morsillo] What have you found most difficult about the role of Chief Customer Advocate?

[Corbin] So, the scale of the business is challenging, but somebody said to me early on: don't worry so much about the complexity of the place, just focus on what you know, the small things you want to achieve and the messages you want to get across. But something I've found even more challenging, which I've had to accept, is that my role sits in tension. I'm a go-between, which means you're never going to entirely please everyone in Telstra about what you're saying and you're never going to entirely please everybody in the consumer movement. But you do have more visibility than most about the challenges and the problems that are being faced both internally and by our customers, and so the greatest challenge is turning that into a message on either side that has traction and gets outcomes. I feel like I have trust, but it's more than just trust. You have to turn that trust into outcomes and the amount of time and resources that takes from so many different people can be incredibly challenging.

[Morsillo] Is it possible to maintain an independent point of view, "holding Telstra to account", after having been a Telstra employee for a time?

[Corbin] Well, I think that that's always going to be a challenge for anybody that works in a commercial company. After all, you're an employee. So, there's been a few things when I've had to step back and think to myself: hang on, maybe there needs to be another level of independence brought to this piece. So, for example, there've been a few times when I've engaged more directly with the Telecommunications Industry Ombudsman (TIO) on an issue, because I've felt that there needed to be an extra level of oversight that I couldn't provide. And secondly, I think that it's quite important to just invite people to hold you to account and to ask you those tough questions. Even though I might not always be able to answer them, and I might not always be comfortable answering them, I think the fact that they get asked to me means that I'm continually reflecting on how independent I am being. How honest am I being? Am I giving the easy answer? I think that comes back to the point about tension. You have to continually think it's not about sending somebody away satisfied necessarily. It's about making sure that the right information is getting in front of the right people.

[Morsillo] As CEO of CTN and ACCAN, you were involved in public policy debates for the telecommunications industry. Are you still able to do this in your role at Telstra?

[Corbin] Yes! In fact, I was very excited last week to participate in the submission for the draft financial hardship standard that is going to the Australian Communications and Media Authority (ACMA). Obviously, there are lots of voices in Telstra that contributed to that submission, but I was really pleased to be asked specifically as Customer Advocate what a consumer perspective might be and that led to an improved submission. So, yes is the answer.

[Morsillo] Not many consumer advocates choose to go to work on the “inside”. How do you think your position is regarded by those advocating on the “outside”?

[Corbin] Well, one issue is they can’t necessarily see everything that you do on the inside. There’s only so much you can share. That’s just the reality of working in a commercial entity. Sometimes I find that a little bit hard. But I’ve also been impressed with how much Telstra does share externally. More than I thought we would, but we do. I think it’s OK for some consumer advocates to be unhappy about what they might perceive as what you’ve done, because you’re taking a slightly different approach when you’re a Customer Advocate. You do have to be effective in the company, which means you can’t be an activist. You’re there as part of the company doing the work, right? Advocates externally play their part as well. But it doesn’t mean that internally you’re not raising those very same issues or making sure that they are front and centre, but you’re not going to necessarily be drawing lots of attention to the fact that you’re doing so, because it’s a different role.

[Morsillo] What are you most proud of achieving so far after these couple of years?

[Corbin] I’ve been working on a major report on customer vulnerability from Telstra’s perspective. It covers what Telstra does and what I think the company might be able to do a bit better or a bit more of. It tries to provide a transparent, honest perspective about where Telstra is at, mistakes and all, and how some of those things have impacted customers who are in vulnerable circumstances. So, I’m very proud of that report, due to be released soon. It’s a lot longer than I thought it would be, even though I probably understand more than most how much Telstra does. But what is really awesome is that the company is looking at making it a regular event, part of our suite of annual reporting, to track progress. So, there’s some real accountability about what we are and aren’t doing, and it will make it a lot better for consumer representatives to engage with Telstra because they can understand where the starting point is. This is a way to make sure that people will know where Telstra sits in relation to these things and hopefully it might drive better practices throughout the

industry and potentially a better conversation about what is best practice. I'll be very proud of that.

Of course, there are a couple of other things that have been great, like Telstra moving to offer more flexible payment options beyond direct debit for its Upfront Plans. It might seem like a small thing, but it's quite a significant achievement. And, further, when I put the report together, I realised that there are quite a lot of things that have been improving, which you lose sight of when you're in there working on the details. So that's another reason why an annual report is a really good idea.

[Morsillo] Thank you, Teresa.

For more information, including Teresa Corbin's report, visit <https://www.telstra.com.au/aboutus/community-environment/chief-customer-advocate>.