

Google Fiber earns good grades from early customers

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Installers show up on time. Headquarters often tells customers when something needs to be fixed without prompting. Unsolicited credits sometimes show up on bills to account for small service glitches.

Talk to a sampling of the earliest [Google](#) Fiber subscribers in the nation's first neighborhood wired to the company's service, and you find a pretty happy lot.

Yet Google Fiber's customers in this first, small group don't talk about the service as life-changing. Even those with its fastest Internet hookups say things feel more evolutionary than revolutionary. So far, they've not found new uses for the Internet. Rather, they say, it's just easier to handle things they were already doing.

Those who buy their TV lineups from Google mostly talk about the delight of dumping predecessors, cable and phone companies that have had the chance over decades to disappoint customers.

Despite some glitches, many talk giddily about living in the first neighborhood in the country to get industrial-strength [Internet connections](#) at consumer prices. They're regularly gleeful that they've found a new, endearingly attentive company willing to fill their TV screens with programming.

"The customer service is outstanding. They're very apologetic if there's a problem. They do their best to take care of things," said Jennifer Tuttle,

whose home was hooked up in November. "It's not something you're used to with that kind of service."

Her experience rings typical of what the Kansas City Star heard from many in the Kansas City, Kan., neighborhoods of Spring Valley and Hanover Heights. The newspaper contacted dozens by online survey and telephone. They're the first to get Google Fiber service, the ultra-fast Internet and TV service that could signal to the rest of the country whether home consumers can show a demand for next-generation connection speeds.

Broadly speaking, these first-in-line customers say prices run roughly the same or less than what they paid to Time Warner Cable or AT&T for Internet or TV packages before.

True, TV channels can freeze for a moment or two, Wi-Fi might not reach every corner of a house, the TV setup feels to some more attuned to Web surfers than couch surfers. None of the problems, however, seems like a deal breaker.

Home office workers seem the most grateful for the Internet upgrade - theoretically 100 times faster than most home broadband - even if the speedier Infobahn doesn't entirely remake life online.

Dramatic ways to put the full 1-gigabit-per-second speeds to use could come later, and figure to be more likely as the service spreads across the market and, next year, to Austin, Texas.

Can Google keep it up?

For now, just a few scattered neighborhoods in Kansas City, Kan., have been lit up with Google Fiber service. Google won't say how many customers it has connected.

The early satisfied customers, analysts said, speak to the resources Google poured into a service unlike any it's tried before.

"It looks like they're pacing their installations based on their ability to fulfill the service, to take the time and make sure the installation goes right," said Glen Friedman, who runs the Ideas & Solutions broadband consulting firm. "The challenge will be to maintain the consistency as they get to a larger and larger customer base."

Another student of the industry, former cable trade group executive Steve Effros, said he fully expected Google Fiber to please its first customers. He's less sure that the company will be able to keep a broader customer base as satisfied.

"If I'm the new guy in town and serving a fraction of the number of people as the old guy, my customer service damn well better be better," said Effros, a cable industry analyst. "Do we really believe that Google is not going to have billing problems? Everybody else has security problems, but not Google? They're human. They'll find this only gets harder."

A Google spokeswoman said in an email: "We're going to continue staffing our support team so that our customers can always get their questions answered quickly, and aren't rushed off the phone."

For now, customers largely say the California-based Internet colossus delivers well.

Time and again they talk of friendly installers and helpful customer service folks - Google representatives fairly easy to reach either by email or phone. The company also responds to problems in an online forum.

Several people in the neighborhood speak appreciatively how Google has

opened its local sales office for neighborhood association meetings, and how it lavishly catered a block party - using local vendors.

Google Fiber isn't without flaws. Among the observations: "There have been some growing pains." "I have experienced periods of very slow response." "Still has some kinks to work out." "Fiber Internet is great. TV service stinks." "Buggy skips in watching TV."

Google Fiber representatives talk proudly about the service but concede it has room for improvement.

"We don't claim to be perfect," said Carlos Casas, the leader of Google Fiber's team in Kansas City. "But we are going to learn and make it better."

Generally, customers gripe very little about the Internet service. Some are just delighted at the price.

Google offers seven years of service for a total of \$300 - for relatively pokey Internet speeds of 5 megabits-per-second downloads and 1 megabit uploads.

"We feel like we're saving a ton of money," said Elaine Mick, a part-time teacher who lives with her husband and a small child. The household still uses Time Warner for its TV package, but finds the low-end Google Fiber Internet connection more reliable than the 15 megabit service it had been buying from the cable company.

At the high end, Google Fiber sells [TV service](#) and a 1-gigabit-per-second Internet connection for \$120 a month on two-year contracts.

That Internet on-ramp can carry data back and forth at theoretically 100 times the speeds of conventional home broadband. Mike Karr notices

the difference.

He's an information technology specialist who regularly checks in by audio Skype with colleagues in India. He regularly sends and receives large data files. Before he got his gigabit connection, such tasks could be maddening. Now he'd rather do that work at home over Google Fiber than at work.

"Everything is pretty instantaneous," he said. "There's never any kind of slowdown."

It's changed slightly, as well, the family use of the Internet. For instance, the Karrs recently moved a number of digital keepsakes to the Internet cloud, using the online storage that Google Fiber includes in its service. Uploading between 20,000 and 30,000 photos and a number of videos, Karr said, took maybe an hour. With his previous Internet connection, which cost him about \$45 a month, it might have taken a week.

Reviews of the TV packages suggest something mildly more problematic: The picture can freeze. On rare channels at rare times, the audio and video seem slightly out of sync. Even people who report such glitches don't seem much annoyed.

"It's buggy," said Gabriel Rowe, a corporate consultant. "At the top of the hour, it will hiccup."

He's also puzzled at the way channels line up. On AT&T's U-verse, his previous TV provider, all the children's channels are grouped together. With Google Fiber, he said, a kid might be more likely to flip from Nickelodeon to more PG-13-grade programming.

Google's numbering of channels does differ from the industry standards. High-definition channels are the low numbers rather than those above

1,000. And the system is designed more for searching - Google, is after all, about using keywords - than surfing.

And sometimes what appears like a [glitch](#) is there by design. For instance, the TV system has an anti-spoiler feature. If a show is being recorded - or somebody started watching it earlier in another room - anybody who turns to that channel while the program is in progress is automatically taken to its start. Some customers find it annoying. Google said it might further customize the feature.

Users differ on the ease of mastering the TV controls. You can use a Nexus 7 tablet that Google throws into the deal, but most seem to prefer a traditional remote control.

There's also broad consensus that streaming Netflix becomes much smoother in a Google Fiber world. The boosted Internet speeds make buffering extinct, and the TV package makes finding a Netflix movie or show simple.

"I've become more of a Netflix viewer," said Layne Feldman, a salesman. "It takes an instant to appear and you're up and watching a movie."

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