

I read in the Morning Advertiser that you are consulting on the energy contract system.

I'll give you the briefest of histories

We have run this pub now for 12 years.

We have switched electricity companies several times at contract end to get the best deal. SWALEC, Scottish Power (twice), E2B (I think), British Gas, and so on.

Our first great falling out was with Scottish Power. They failed to read our meter (even though it is on an outside wall). We paid regular DDs with them. When we got to the end of our contract with them, they really did read the meter, and reckoned we owed them £2700 (about a year's worth of electricity). While this might well have been true, the fact that they waited so long was unacceptable. We were getting phone calls from SP, and from a debt collection agency they had irretrievably passed our account on to, and it was now out of their control. We were threatened with bailiffs. It was not a pleasant situation to be in.

I regard myself as a reasonable human being, but we have probably had disagreements with just about every electricity company we have dealt with. The best company was E2B (think that was what they were called – in Milton Keynes) .Sadly they went out of business.

The most recent falling out we have had was with British Gas. We switched banks. They were told by our new bank what the new account number etc was. They failed to move their direct debit across. I failed to notice until we owed them about £2000. We agreed that they would take £600 per month, rather than £300 per month, until we caught up. When cheques started bouncing, I checked the bank account and found that they had actually taken £2200 all in one lump sum.

That is probably the third time that an electricity company has used DD to take more than we have agreed. I thought I had become wise enough to close the DD when this was about to happen, but that really took me by surprise, as we had clearly agreed the figure of £600, and they had written to me only a few weeks before it was due to start.

Unsurprisingly, I don't believe I can trust any electricity company to do DD properly any more. I am sure you agree, and I trust you would also agree that I shouldn't have to pay a higher rate to pay by a different method (eg electronic transfer).

In the middle of all this argument, the British Gas contract was coming to an end, BG told me they wanted to roughly double their rates and I told them I was terminating. A local agent offered me a better deal with Eon and was setting it up through a broker. BG then phoned and offered to beat Eon – this had happened a previous year. The previous year I accepted. This time I was so sick of them that I said I would stick with Eon's slightly worse offer. They kept phoning me to say that no-one had taken over the site yet. In the end, we got beyond the contract date, and I got the agent to find out what was going on. My form had become stuck behind another in their office and they had failed to process it. Sorry, too late to do anything now, and no, they were not prepared to reimburse the £1500 difference between Eon and British Gas.

This was an absolute pig's ear, and I spent much time on it, and lost £1500 on it. I was being contacted by three different departments in British Gas, one telling me I was going to be DDED for £600, one telling me I owed £2200 and another asking if I wanted to renew, or somesuch (happy to send you details of correspondence if you are interested, at one point I suggested that the three lots from Camberley, Leicester and Oxford I think should meet at Watford Gap services and agree what was really going on ), I contacted the customer complaints lot, with whom I agreed a plan. They assured me we had agreed that everything was well, following which I got a letter from a company called shoemiths, who had now taken on the debt of £2200 (which BG had single-handedly created), and they were going to take further action. In the end, BG did apologise, and reimburse me (about £180) for the bounced cheques that occurred in the fortnight after they took the £2200 and blew us through our overdraft limit, and they recalculated the consumption. But having signed back with British Gas, I was phoned by a BG salesman who began his conversation 'I understand you used to be with British Gas....' I laughed out loud, took his name and tried to use his misinformation to renegotiate a better deal, but it didn't work! But the salesman did offer me a free 'smart meter' because obviously I was so bad at reading the existing one. Cheek!

So in summary:

- The whole system is a pointless and confusing waste of time and money – I have wasted days bidding, quoting, complaining etc. Are the overheads really cheaper than under the old system? Has the presence of several companies bidding for gas really kept the cost of gas down, or does the cost of gas just go where it will? Or are the costs just being passed on to the customer, who has to spend far more time than he ever did before?
- I fail to understand why one company should be any better/cheaper than another, unless it is cheaper because its rates are so good it needs no salesmen and its service is so good it doesn't need a complaints department.
- All companies who quote me should explain where the money is going – how much on electricity, how much on admin, how much on complaints, how much on sales.
- I fail to see why the good offer that BG made me, beating Eon, was no longer available once the Eon deal fell through. Once a company makes an offer, it should remain on the table
- There should be greater freedom for other companies to make better offers at any time.
- There should be greater flexibility regarding contracts – instead of you having to notify them that you are terminating not before the 90 days, it would make more sense for it to be assumed I am terminating anyway. Make 90 days the first date on which everyone can pitch in with their deals. Have a national data base on which every customer is listed with their renewal date and site number.
- How can you motivate companies to offer their best deal first, especially to loyal customers. An existing customer should be offered something unbeatable.
- I think I am now technically tied to a three year deal with BG at very poor rates. If gas prices go down, as there is talk of, then everyone should be allowed to retender.
- I am not sure if a three year deal ever really makes sense
- If the gas company breaks its promise over DD and takes more money than we agreed, this should be regarded as breach of contract, and the customer should be free to renegotiate with anyone he wishes.

- Each customer should have a single, well informed contact point with an energy company – talking to four different departments at once is crazy, and call centres are pretty useless. The first time you are contacted by someone who is not your contact, assume the contract is void.
- Companies that fail to read your meter more often than every six months should forfeit the right to charge you for electricity.
- There should not be cheaper rates if you pay by DD.
- As soon as you get phoned by someone from your existing company who has heard your contract has lapsed, you should be allowed to assume that it has, even if it hasn't.

Bring back the way we used to do it.

