The "Un-Carrier" Cometh

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I have to admit that I'm excited to hear what T-Mobile has on its mind tomorrow. I want to know more about what's behind John Legere's devious, trouble-making smile. Basically, I want the specifics on what it means to be the "un-carrier"?

I'll venture to say that the wireless industry has long needed a shot in the arm, and T-Mobile could prove just that if it really does come to market with some revolutionary business model. I was recently on the line with the CEO of a major wireless company, and he started the call completely off topic by calling Legere's recent comments "refreshing".

I'm certainly not hurting AT&T and Verizon's feelings by pointing out that they're easy targets for every underdog. Whether we're talking OTT players, regional carriers, app developers, or regulators, the two biggest carriers in the United States cannot escape the pressures inherent in sitting on top of the mountain.

On the consumer side, AT&T and Verizon get knocked for their customer service, criticized for their slow response to new technology trends, and they will forever be slammed for pricing and coverage. These and many other complaints just go with the territory when you serve millions of customers across the country. And perhaps there are instances where these kinds of comments from consumers and others are justified, but there's plenty of instances where they can also be defended.

Before I get back to Legere and T-Mobile, I'll take just a moment to consider AT&T and Verizon Wireless for what they are: two of the largest, most recognizable brands on the planet. They have invested billions of dollars to build private wireless networks for which there are no parallels. They enable hundreds of millions of Americans to remain in contact from just about anywhere. They offer data rates that as best I can tell really are competitive with the rest of the world on a per-byte basis. Have they managed to satisfy every user all the time? Definitely not, and if you read the comment sections on just about any article written about these companies, you're sure to run across some incredibly passionate opinions on their networks, as well as how they serve their customers.

But on the whole, I'm going to have to say that AT&T and Verizon are the best we've got and they're not exactly failing at providing the one service we tech-savvy humans have decided we can't live without.

That said, they can do better, and this is where I'll return to Legere and the "Un-Carrier".

T-Mobile has a chance to rise above the accepted paradigm and push AT&T and Verizon Wireless towards innovation, both technologically and with regards to their business models.

T-Mobile is quite a ways behind the pack in terms of subscriber numbers, as well as in their LTE rollout. As a result, they're going to need to do more than call AT&T's network "crap," as Legere did at CES. They're eventually going to have to follow up their talk with new ways of approaching the market that actually appeal to consumers. They're going to have to fiddle with data pricing, device subsidies, and customer service in ways that consumers either never thought possible or had been dreaming about for years.

I haven't made up my mind whether "un-carrier" is just a funny term, or if T-Mobile really does expect to offer its customers something different. In the end, I hope that there really is something of substance behind Legere's smile, because it will make available wireless service better for everyone, regardless of carrier.

OK, T-Mobile, you've got our attention. After all, we're not here to discuss Sprint right now. It's time to show us what it means to be the "Un-Carrier". We're listening.

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