

RIVALS

## A PR battle for the ages: AT&T vs. Verizon

John Cook on Thursday, February 4, 2010, 12:29pm PST

There's certainly no love lost between Verizon and AT&T, the country's two largest wireless carriers. They've been battling it out with their snarky advertising campaign now for several weeks, but the tussle doesn't stop there. And in the past two days their rivalry has extended into my coverage as the two wireless titans jockey for PR pole position. The goal? Each is attempting to create the impression that they have the most robust wireless network.



It started yesterday after Verizon issued a press release declaring that they had spent \$907 million upgrading its wireless network in Washington state over the past nine years. AT&T saw the post and responded that they have spent \$775 million over the past three years.



Now, this morning, within two minutes of one another, I received dueling press releases from the companies touting their performance in two customer surveys.

The first arrived from AT&T, which said that it ranked number one in the [Brand Keys Customer Loyalty Engagement Index](#). That index measured things like network quality, technology leadership and competitive plans -- with AT&T saying that they "excelled in all three."

"Nothing means more to us than knowing we have earned the loyalty of our customers," said Ralph de la Vega, President and CEO, AT&T Mobility and Consumer Markets in the release.

Two minutes later I received another press release, this time from Verizon. It was titled: "Verizon Wireless leads industry in customer care in latest J.D. Power and Associates Study."

Coincidence?

Maybe. Maybe not.

So, who is really better? Of course, that depends on your geographic location, usage and other factors. And I am not sure a third-party study can tell us that.



But there is one more concrete way to gauge who has the momentum. That's by taking a look at who is adding more customers, and losing fewer.

To do that, I took a look at each company's fourth quarter earnings report.

Turns out that [Verizon](#) had 2.2 million net customer additions during the quarter, and showed a total churn rate (lost subscribers) of 1.42 percent. Total customers stood at 91.2 million, making it the biggest

carrier in the country.

Meanwhile, [AT&T](#) -- which remains the exclusive carrier for Apple's iPhone -- showed 2.7 million net additions. And its total churn dropped to 1.44 percent, slightly higher than Verizon. Total subscribers reached 85.1 million.

Based on that, it looks like AT&T is chipping away a bit at Verizon's lead. No wonder Verizon unveiled their national ad campaign featuring 3G coverage maps from two carriers, you know the ads which show the multiple holes in AT&T's national coverage.

Will AT&T continue to grab share, albeit slowly?

If the iPhone comes off its exclusive deal with AT&T -- which has been widely rumored -- it will be interesting to watch.