After prolonged service outage, Petnet shuts down, citing coronavirus



Enlarge / You’re just going to have to feed this furry friend the old-fashioned way. Before his sad eyes scour your soul.

reader comments

77 with 62 posters participating

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Cloud-connected, “smart” automated pet-feeder system Petnet has had a rough spring. The service not only went offline in February, but all its customer service vanished, too, leaving users in the dark until the company apologized and pushed a patch more than a week later. The service briefly returned for some users but fell off again in March. Now, after weeks of

silence, the company is blaming COVID-19 for driving it offline for good—even though its problems started weeks or months before the novel coronavirus became a significant concern.

Several Petnet customers began reaching out to Ars during the second and third weeks of April to report that, once again, not only were their feeders not working, but also they couldn't reach anyone at Petnet about it. Everyone's feeders didn't go offline at the same time but seemed to fail in slow sequence over the period between March 26 and April 13.

The company emailed its customers on March 26, blaming the novel coronavirus for outages and delays. The message, titled, "Petnet: Impact of COVID-19," read:

> *Dear Petnet Customers,*
>
> *The purpose of this outreach is to let you know how the COVID-19 crisis is impacting Petnet operations and your SmartFeeder usage. We work with a wide range of vendors, from other start up companies to well known establishments, to help provide convenience through a series of connected services.*
>
> *One of our third party vendors has notified us that due to COVID-19 their operations are experiencing an adverse effect. We will monitor this situation closely and provide you with any updates as they arise.*
>
> *Our service center is experiencing higher than normal ticket volumes, so our response time may take longer than usual. Thank you for your patience and for your understanding during this challenging time.*
>
> *Best Regards,*
>
> *The Petnet Team*

The message to customers listed the same email (support@petnet.io) and Twitter (@petnetiosupport) handles the company has always used, but every reader who wrote to Ars said they were unable to receive support through either. The company tweeted on April 13 that it was experiencing "a service disruption" affecting both its first- and second-generation smart feeders. On April 14, Petnet posted another Tweet saying, "We are still experiencing SmartFeeder connection downtime due to an ongoing service disruption that is currently being investigated." As of April 27, that remains the company's last tweet.

Unsupported

Users looking for support received messages directing them to a third-party site called Tier One Success. Tier One bills itself as "simplified customer support to help meet your Smart Home needs," but it appears to have almost no online presence outside of the link sent to Petnet device owners. Its only external communication is a Twitter account with 16 followers. The last time any message was posted to that account, in July 2019, Tier One indicated that it exclusively supported Petnet products and had not yet expanded to customer support for any other smart home device.

Tier One at one time did post an open job listing on another site which described the firm as an "in-house customer success team" for Petnet. A LinkedIn bio for the person listed as the founder of Tier One, Joshua Bullock, is bare-bones and uninformative.

All complaints, however, whether addressed to Petnet directly or made through the Tier One support form, seemed to disappear into the ether. By April 16, all of the new customer reviews on Petnet's Amazon product listing were surmising that the company had gone out of business. Many tweets to @petnetiosupport and many reader emails to us concluded the

same thing.

Messages sent to email addresses posted by the company bounced back, as they had during the February outage as well. Ars was able to track down a working email address for a Petnet employee on April 23 and sent a message asking if the company was still operational.

Though the message was sent to a personal email address, the reply read, “Thank you for reaching out to us about the issue. We are terribly sorry for the inconvenience our customers are experiencing right now” and directed us to contact Petnet CEO Carlos Herrera, providing a phone number.

A few hours later, Petnet users began receiving an email explaining that the company was more or less going out of business. Several forwarded their copies to Ars.

“Last week on April 14, 2020, we briefed all of our customers regarding one of our third-party connected vendor’s inability to fully resource their company and stay functionally online,” the message reads. “As of this writing, this situation remains unresolved but we are confident it will be overcome soon.”

But due to the exceptional circumstances the COVID-19 pandemic has created, Petnet went on, many of its vendors—largely startups like itself—were “severely and negatively affected in their day to day operations.” In short: the funding dried up. Due to a lack of funds, Petnet said, it “re-prioritized and reorganized [its] resources,” including:

- *We have furloughed 100% of our remaining staff*
- *We have ceased all future product development, including bug fixes*
- *We have turned off all non-infrastructure related expenses*
- *We have terminated our office lease and are working remotely*

- *We have applied for all available CARES stimulus funding*

As Ars readers noticed back in February, however, the company’s office space has been available to lease for quite some time, possibly as far back as October 2019.

Ars left a voicemail message at the number given to us for Herrera; we’ll update the story if we hear back. In the meantime, it seems like a good bet that anyone who actually wants their automatic pet feeder to work should probably be shopping for a new product.

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