

Please Make Your Phone System Even Less Responsive, I Might Be A Customer!

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I am having an Andy Rooney moment. If you aren't prepared for a rant, with a message at the end, stop here.

Have you ever had problems navigating the phone systems of companies you call? The days of reaching a receptionist or an operator are long gone with most companies. Automated phone systems, designed to prevent you from ever talking to a human being seem to be the trend.

It's the end of a long day of returning telephone calls, I'm frustrated and angry about the time I've wasted. Like many of us who spend a lot of time on the phone, it is becoming more and more difficult to reach the person you are calling, even to leave a message!

Somewhat reluctantly, I am now at peace with voicemail systems. When they first started becoming pervasive, I was frustrated at never being able to reach a human. However, now, I accept them, even find them useful for leaving people quick reports, updates and messages. I even have to admit that sometimes I time my calls so that I know I will reach voicemail, sometimes it is preferable to talk to the machine, rather than directly to individuals.

Now the object of my current frustration: "The Corporate Phone Non-Answering System." I haven't found who manufactures these systems, however, with their pervasiveness, I wonder if it is making some of the mainline vendors nervous.

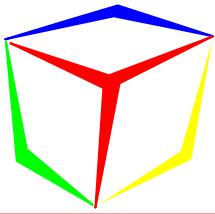
The vendors of these systems have constructed ways for companies to prevent people from reaching them over the phone, and their systems are very effective. When you first call a company with one of these systems, you first have to wait for "Press 1 for sales, 2 for customer support, 3 for Accounting-----999 for the dial by name directory-----or hold for the operator. This is a very interesting technique, the system gives you the feeling they really want to connect you with the right person or department because of the number of options they give you. I actually am coming to believe this is just another subtle way of having companies tell us "don't bother us on the phone, we'll talk to you when we want to!"

However, I'm always conscientious, I certainly don't want to upset things by pressing the wrong number and bothering the wrong person. Clearly, people using these systems don't want calls coming in, they only want to use them for outbound calls.

By the time they have gone through the list, I've forgotten the number I was supposed to press, so I have to go through it again.

Most of the time, I make the mistake of trying 99 for the dial by name directory. I listen to the instructions, always noting which number I have to use for Q and which for Z, even though I seldom have to use those letters....Hmmm maybe I'll try calling Catherine Zetta-Jones---but does she go by Zetta-Jones, Jones, or even Douglas????

After I have listened, I make my picks, spelling out the person's name. It is always difficult. Usually, I am calling from my mobile, so I have to figure out how to use the key pad, while still holding the phone close to my ear to see if there is a response and another number I should hit.



Among the many calls I made today, I tried 5 people I know, I tried spelling their names, but got the message: “Name not in the directory,” I tried again, after all I am a bad speller, same thing. What’s up, I’ve spoken to these people in the past few days. I thought they were still employed? Maybe it’s management’s new way of saying you’ve been laid off, they take you out of the name directory on the phone system. Interesting new management technique!

Not to worry, I know I can hit “0” and always get an operator. I try that, get some nice music, wait for an operator....nothing happens. I try hitting “0” again, get disconnected, have to re-dial and go through the entire thing all over. Finally, I get to the operator option, I hit “0” and wait patiently. This time, I get a message, “The operator is unavailable, please leave a voicemail.”

I get ready to leave a voicemail, not completely trusting it will get to the person I intended it for, then I get the message: “This voicemail box is full and no longer accepting messages.”

Frustrated, I slam down the phone and send an email---I think this is what the company must have intended anyway. Since they have made it virtually impossible to contact their people by phone, they either don’t want to talk to me or they prefer email.

But Dave, you say, surely you are exaggerating---any of you who know me, know that I am prone to a little exaggeration. It’s Thursday afternoon, this week I have taken a survey. Of the 90-100 calls I have made this week, on 27% of them I was either unable to reach the person through the dial by name directory, or I was unable to reach and operator (or leave a message).

So the moral of my story: I don’t think they have designed phone systems that know whether a call is from a potential customer, and angry customer, a sales person, an investor, an editor or someone else. So if you really want to talk to these people---well maybe you don’t want sales people, make sure your phone system works! Find ways to make it as easy as possible for customer to reach you and give you their money! Don’t make them/us struggle to hand over our hard-earned cash.

If you have to use a name directory, keep it current, make it the first option of the 999 options that are read. Whatever you do, make it so that someone can talk to an operator or at least leave a message.

Consumer products companies use mystery shoppers to understand their customer’s buying experiences. Many companies try to put themselves in their customers’ shoes to learn how they want to buy from them. Try your phone system on for size yourself. Call the central number, see if you can get connected to your number, see if you can leave a voicemail at your number, see if you can leave a voicemail at the main operator number. If it works, you might keep or acquire some customers, if it doesn’t, think of what you are saying to anyone that calls in.

This week, 27% of the people I tried to talk to or leave a message for, were not able to receive my calls. My only options were their mobiles or email. A good number of those calls were to people I wanted to speak with about buying their products or services. Since I wasn’t able to reach them, I went somewhere else---companies that you can actually call and ultimately speak to someone.

Well now I’ve vented. Maybe next week, I write an article about “customer service on- hold queues.” After all, I get bored playing solitaire while waiting hours on hold. I can use that time for a rant on those systems.

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