

## PRESS NO. 2 FOR POOR SERVICE

Companies lose more than just money when they automate customer service

*By A. Blanton Godfrey*

Remember the good old days? You'd call a service provider, a human would answer on the first or second ring and ask, "May I help you?" Recently I made a number of service calls in connection with my moving out of state. This meant, of course, canceling services at one place and starting them at another. The experience was incredible, to phrase it kindly.

For most of my regional and national services, the calls I placed were answered by automated call centers that instructed, "Listen carefully to the following menu because the dialing options have recently changed." I was then led through a Hades of voice mail with layer after layer of choices. My local phone company, SNET demanded five different times that I enter my 10-digit phone number followed by my three-digit "private code" located on the top right corner of my bill. This repeated exercise proved meaningless, as I later learned that all requests to disconnect service require the caller to talk to a human. When one finally came on the line, guess what she asked me first? "What's your 10-digit telephone number and three-digit private code?"

Inevitably, when I waited to talk with a real person, I was first put on hold. While that was happening, I was privileged to listen to someone else's idea of music or – even worse – connected to a local radio station and blasted with a five- or ten-minute commercial for some special savings only available that day.

Attempting to get telephone service at my new location was even worse. After calling my new service provider and negotiating the usual button-pressing maze, I reached the option, "To establish new service, please press 1 and wait for a service representative." I was put on hold for almost 15 minutes.

When the service rep finally did come on, she laughed when I gave her my new address. She informed me I'd called Bell South Georgia and needed to call Bell South North Carolina. She gave me that number and I called it. I then repeated the procedure, only to be told that my new home was not in a Bell South area after all. I would need to call Sprint!

Calls to my two wireless phone companies, my long-distance carrier, my two electric companies, my gas company and my two cable television providers went much the same way. My local bank, noted for its good service, wouldn't even take my change of address over the phone; it had to be in writing. However, there were a few pleasant surprises. My new garbage collector not only answered the phone on the first ring and started service right away, but the service rep looked up the correct numbers for three other service providers.

The best surprise was the exceptional service at the Connecticut Department of Motor Vehicles. Not only did it accept e-mail, but it responded quickly with a personal note telling me exactly what to do about my car. The process was so easy, so personal and so much the way to do business, I was stunned.

It's fair to say that there's still much room for improvement in most service areas. With large service organizations, the drive for increased efficiency and reduced costs means the customer is often forgotten. I suspect that if these organizations did a thorough study of the costs involved with automated telephone systems – the costs of developing and maintaining software, lost business, handling complaints, staffing, repeat calls and delays in acquiring new business – they would find that they are actually increasing costs while *decreasing* quality.

For companies providing services of the phone or Internet, I have the following suggestion: Reserve one hour of the next executive management or board of directors meeting to experience firsthand the customer service that your company provides. Using a speakerphone so all can hear, make several simulated calls for new service, change of service, billing inquiry, service repair and complaints. Now decide if this is really how you

want your company to serve its customers. It would also be informative to call your two biggest competitors and make the same requests. For some industries, this would at least provide much amusement. For others, you may start to understand why your company is losing so much business.

For those who don't control the service but only endure it, I suggest you make a copy of this article and send it to your least favorite service provider with this note: "I think the author was writing about you."

### **About the author**

A. Blanton Godfrey is Dean of the College of Textiles and Joseph D. Moore Professor at North Carolina State University. He just recently moved from Connecticut to North Carolina.

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