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Is there no end to phone-system torture?

Automatons on the other end of the line can leave one too frustrated for words

I suffer from post-traumatic-frazzled-phone-stress syndrome — and it isn't pretty.

I called Hydro-Québec recently and began your typical modern phone ordeal.

I punched my way through several menus and wound up on hold, because the volume of calls was “higher than usual.” I was about to hang up, when an announcement said: “Estimated waiting time: eight minutes.”

OK, I thought, I can handle that — but it turns out I couldn't. After years of automated phone-answering torture, I suffer from post-traumatic-frazzled-phone-stress syndrome — and it isn't pretty.

My condition was triggered when I put on my speakerphone to wait — and Hydro started to blare product ads so loudly my phone sounded like a concert speaker, though its volume was on minimum.

To escape it, I had to put the phone outside my office — three rooms down the hall. Then I went back to work, listening with one ear in case an agent answered and I had to run back to pick up before they hung up.

The estimated eight minutes turned into nine, then 10, then 19 as the ads thundered on and I got increasingly edgy. By the time someone answered after 23 minutes I was fed up, and said so — that I'd never have waited if I'd known the real time.

The agent said it wasn't his responsibility, it was another department's. He sounded exhausted from dealing with frazzled people like me who'd been worn down by automated phone torture systems.

I'm patient and friendly when face to face with service people, but on the phone, I can get tired and stressed. What am I tired of ?

I'm tired of carefully listening to phone menus, trying to decide which of nine options I want, when none seems quite right. Half the time I choose one, I spend 10 minutes on hold, until whoever answers says I chose wrong — and switches me to another department where I wait all over again.

I'm tired of punching in my credit card or account number — because whoever answers will ask me to repeat it. Over years of giving machines my Visa number, I have never not had to repeat it later. Have you?

I'm tired of giving my name, address, birth date, mother's-maiden-name and zodiac sign to one agent — then repeating it all each time I'm switched to another agent. I feel like a POW giving my name, rank and serial number, in voice jail.

I'm tired of answering secret “security questions” about my third dog's second name, to get even trivial information. Last week, I dialed 611 to ask what phoning Hawaii cost, but before letting me in on this classified information they wanted my name, rank and phone number.

After locating my file, they asked several “secret questions” to make sure I was me. I understand security measures for banking, but what's so secret about the price of a phone call? What can I do with this information — reveal to the world that my carrier charges five cents a minute for Hawaii and set off a telephone price war?

I'm tired of agents who aren't allowed to make any decisions without talking to their “supervisor” — a mythical Wizard of Oz figure you can't speak to directly. You must communicate via your agent who disappears for 15 minutes while you listen to ads about their latest phone-and-TV packages, or airline seat sale.

When they return they'll tell you whatever you requested is impossible and blame it on the Wizard.

And of course, I'm fed up that sometimes after 45 minutes of all of the above, the line suddenly goes dead.

Most of all I'm tired of talking to machines instead of people, tired of voice-recognition computers that ask you to say who you're calling. So you say “Dr. Wolchevski.” Then the machine says: “Did you say Dr. Wolfson?” And you say “No — WOL-CHEVSKI!” and it says: “Did you say Dr. Wolf is skiing?”

Finally, it says “Sorry — I didn't understand that. Please call back later.” (Click.)

Sometimes, I get testy when I finally get through to some poor service person. Then I apologize, because it's not their fault. We're both victims of the machines.

Yet there is hope we can beat technology — with technology. More companies are getting phone systems that announce your estimated waiting time — accurately. In fact, most companies deliberately overestimate your wait time by several minutes so you feel better when it's shorter — unlike Hydro, which underestimates it so you feel worse.

My best hope lies in firms like Apple whose machines now tell you: “All our agents are busy. Please leave your number and we'll call you back soon.”



That way you get to hang up, and they get a much nicer you when they phone back. And if you're busy then, you can always say: “Sorry, all our customers are occupied. Please listen carefully to the following menu.”

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