

AOL Said, 'If You Leave Me I'll Do Something Crazy'

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YOU'RE going to listen to me."

This was the taunting command of an AOL customer service representative who sounded like a jailer twirling his keychain. The customer on the phone wanted to complete his business, but the person on the other end of the phone did not share a sense of urgency.

It is fitting that the customer service representative's wish to be heard has been fulfilled on a scale he never anticipated.

When Vincent Ferrari, 30, of the Bronx, called AOL to cancel his membership last month, it took him a total of 21 minutes, including the time spent on an automated sequence at the beginning and some initial waiting in a queue. He recorded the five minutes of interaction with the AOL customer service representative and, a week later, posted the audio file on his blog, *Insignificant Thoughts* (insignificantthoughts.com/2006/06/13/cancelling-aol/).

Shortly thereafter, those five minutes became the online equivalent of a top-of-the-charts single.

To listen as Mr. Ferrari tries to cancel his membership is to join him in a wild, horrifying descent into customer-service hell. The AOL representative, self-identified as John, sounds like a native English speaker; he refuses to comply when Mr. Ferrari asks, demands and finally pleads -- over and over again -- to close his account.

"By my count, he used the word 'cancel' 21 times," said Nicholas J. Graham, an AOL vice president and spokesman. "That's not counting the I-don't-need-it's, I-don't-want-it's and I-don't-use-it's. Add the other inferences, it's probably closer to 30." Mr. Graham, almost needless to say, was sharply critical of John's lack of responsiveness.

Some people who posted comments on the Web about the recording -- about 20 percent of them, in Mr. Ferrari's estimation -- found it so incredible that they declared it a hoax. But Mr. Graham said the call's authenticity had been internally verified, and he sent Mr. Ferrari a letter of apology. He said John was no longer with

the company.

If John's behavior had been that of a person in the grip of genuine pathological madness, the recording of the call would not have drawn the attention of so many people, nor would it have been replayed on national television and radio programs. What one hears in John is an actor performing clumsily, to be sure, but working with a script provided by his employer that confuses "customer service" with "sales."

During his travail, Mr. Ferrari does his best to nudge John away from the script: "When I say, 'Cancel the account,' I don't mean, 'Figure out how to help me keep it.' I mean, 'Cancel the account.' "

People who left online comments about Mr. Ferrari's AOL call expressed delight, more often than disbelief, in seeing public exposure of an AOL experience similar to their own. "The same thing happened to me" is a refrain among the posts. Before the advent of the Web, an encounter with inept customer service was ours to bear alone, with little recourse or means to warn others. Now, Mr. Ferrari can swiftly post on the Web a digital "documentary" that recorded his dismal experience, and news-sniffing hounds do the rest.

With the enthusiastic help of users of Digg, the much-visited site that lets readers rate news stories, the online world found its way to Mr. Ferrari's door. (Actually, too many curiosity seekers arrived that day: the server that hosted his blog crashed hard when about 300,000 visitors tried to push through the door at about the same time.) YouTube did its part in spreading the word, by making available a replay of the AOL call that was part of Mr. Ferrari's appearance on the "Today" show on NBC.

YouTube was also the place to enjoy a new one-minute gem titled "A Comcast Technician Sleeping on My Couch." The technician, in Washington, had arrived at Brian Finkelstein's home to replace a faulty modem and had to call in to Comcast's central office. Placed on hold just like powerless customers, the technician fell asleep after an hour of waiting.

How should Mr. Finkelstein have responded? By writing a letter of complaint to some distant regulatory authority that will require years before it acts? Far more effective means are now at hand. He recorded, then uploaded the video clip with some humorous asides about missed appointments and unfulfilled promises, and got immediate satisfaction in the act of sharing. More than 500,000 viewers have watched Mr. Finkelstein's video "thank you" note to Comcast.

AOL and Comcast executives in charge of customer service may long for the good old days when they had to deal only with a finite number of federal regulators and state attorneys general, not a universe of millions of Web-savvy customers.

In 2004, AOL signed an agreement with the Federal Trade Commission about problems related to -- care to make a guess? -- subscriber's requests for cancellation. That was followed last year with an "assurance of discontinuance" reached with Eliot Spitzer, the New York attorney general, concerning -- yes -- subscriber's requests for cancellation. In both cases, investigations had revealed that AOL practiced a strange form of customer service, continuing to bill subscribers who had called to cancel, and had thought that they had done so, but who were marked

down as "saved."

In the New York case, AOL agreed last August to pay a fine of \$1.25 million and to put into place a new system, called third-party verification, in which any caller who starts off expressing a wish to cancel and ends up being persuaded to remain a member must declare this intention to a company hired to act as a disinterested witness.

AOL internally boasts to its employees that third-party verification is an "industry-first initiative to guarantee quality," but isn't this like a parolee showing off his electronic ankle bracelet as proof of how trustworthy he is? The public embarrassment of the settlement faded with time, but then Mr. Ferrari's five-minute recording undid 10 months of public relations repair work.

A company like AOL must now submit to unceasing accountability. On the Monday after the public debut of Mr. Ferrari's call to AOL, Scott Falconer, an AOL executive vice president, sent an e-mail message to company employees alerting them to Mr. Ferrari's blog post and warned, "On any interaction, you should assume that it could be posted on the Web."

The continuing customer-service problem at AOL is one beyond the reach of an attorney general's office: it is within AOL's rights to refuse to reorganize its procedures so that a customer can depart without having to run through a sales gantlet.

The employees who handle cancellation requests belong not to a Cancellations Processing Department but rather to AOL's "Retention Queue." They are referred to as "retention consultants" and "save employees," and their bonuses depend upon the number of members who are induced to stay with offers of new enticements and deals, not on the speed with which they help members leave.

After the embarrassment of Mr. Ferrari's call, an internal memo was issued that outlined a new "streamlined offer sequence" for handling cancellation requests, but the protocol still called for pitching two offers, if circumstances permitted.

When AOL customers call to cancel, the average duration of the call is 10 to 11 minutes. If we generously assume the shorter time, then the three million members who dropped AOL in the 12 months through March had to make an involuntary investment equivalent to 250 work-years in order to wriggle free.

Mr. Graham, the AOL spokesman, did not apologize about the company's deliberate decision to deny customers the option to cancel with a click of a button online. The customers' calls to cancel provide the company with an opportunity to lead customers to services or features they had not known about, enabling them, Mr. Graham said, to "find their Eureka moment" or to accept a tempting offer of a lower price.

Fifty percent of calls that begin with the intention to cancel end up with the member deciding to stay. If members decide to proceed with the cancellation, then the phone conversation can be treated as an exit interview, helping the company learn about what it should improve. Mr. Graham said that to do anything other than this would

not be "good practice."

IF I were asked to think of an online company that provides exemplary customer service to its subscribers, Netflix, the DVD rental company, would come to mind well before AOL. When I took a look to see whether Netflix offered a way for a customer to cancel membership swiftly while online, I discovered that it provides a procedure - a click on a link, a click on a checkmark box, and one more click to complete -- that would take no more than two seconds. No exit interviews, no last-ditch offers while I'm held captive on the phone.

Seeing how Netflix would be so protective of my time were I to leave makes me all the more unlikely to do so.

Drawing (Drawing by Hal Mayforth)

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