



Dow Jones & Reuters

The New York Times

Circuits; SECTG

Customer Service: The Hunt for a Human

By KATIE HAFNER

2,018 words

30 December 2004

The New York Times

Late Edition - Final

1

English

Copyright 2004 The New York Times Company. All Rights Reserved.

TRY to reach customer service at Amazon.com to fix a problem with an order and you will encounter one of the most prominent and frustrating aspects of the Internet era: a world devoid of humans. Not only is there no telephone number on Amazon's Web site, but the company makes a point of not including one. Instead, customers are asked to fill out an online form and wait for a response.

"It's incredibly annoying," said Ellen Hobbs of Austin, Tex., whose frustration has led her to publish Amazon.com's customer support number at her own Web site (clicheideas.com/amazon.htm). "They haven't invested the kind of money in helping you solve problems as they have in selling you things." In December alone, some 1,100 people visited Ms. Hobbs's site.

Indeed, in the pursuit of customer service, the Sisyphean challenge of making contact with a human defines the automated age, and can sometimes feel like a full-time job.

"It's almost as if we're dealing with this ghostly machine," said Lauren Weinstein, a telecommunications consultant in Los Angeles who has made an avocation of studying customer service. "You assume there are people back there somewhere, but it's as if the whole purpose of these systems isn't to provide customer service but to keep the customer at arm's length."

Now, by punching or typing in a sequence of numbers, or by speaking to a machine that has been programmed to understand human speech, you can have access to information previously impossible to obtain without a human -- the whereabouts of a package, for instance, or the balance of a bank account.

What is increasingly difficult to obtain, though, is the actual human. "Unless you want to call a neighbor," said Dorothy Meyer of Escondido, Calif. "You get them right away." Then she thought better of it. "But then, you don't. You get their answering machine."

Many consumers have developed any number of tricks for reaching a sentient being. Mr. Weinstein and others have discovered a number of techniques for outwitting the automation to reach a human, especially when confronted with the labyrinthine menus that accompany most phone-based systems.

Most people, for instance, know to punch zero even when the option isn't offered. And many a frustrated consumer has learned to pretend to be one of the few remaining telephone customers in possession of a rotary-dial phone.

"But a lot of people don't take it far enough," Mr. Weinstein said. Sometimes, for instance, he said, automated phone systems are programmed to ignore the first one, two or three pushes of zero. "But if you push it again, and then you do it again, then it goes through. That's fairly common."

Mr. Weinstein said he knew of one system where you had to do it four times in a row. "Then it's like a jackpot in Vegas -- you say, 'Bingo.'"

Increasingly, it is the Internet that engenders the frustration. Lou Garcia, president of the Society of Consumer Affairs Professionals in Business, a group based in Alexandria, Va., said that in a recent survey of 1,000 people about their experiences with customer service, the society found that "at the top of the dislike list is that they can't find a human."

And while calling a toll-free number is still the preferred way to reach customer service, he said, his studies show more and more people using the Web because they have no other choice.

"Each time we do one of these things we see a big uptick in customers contacting the Internet," Mr. Garcia said. When they do, as at Amazon.com, there is little, if any, indication of how to get live assistance.

Rachael Flynn thought she was getting an early start on the holidays when, a good two weeks before Christmas, she clicked on a British Web site called Everything iPod (everythingipod.co.uk) and ordered a radio transmitter for her boyfriend's iPod.

But when her credit card was declined and Ms. Flynn tried to get through to a customer-service representative, one wall after another presented itself. She scoured the site in vain for a telephone number or even an e-mail address.

"I was getting a bit panicky," said Ms. Flynn, who lives in Cork, Ireland. "And when you're in a panic state you really want to talk to a human being." Finally she found an online customer-service form and filled it out, twice, just to be safe. It took four days to get a personal response by e-mail.

All ended well. The purchase went through, and the gift arrived with a few days to spare. "But I never did get to a human being," Ms. Flynn said.

As it turned out, the company had removed its telephone number from the site last year because although the site sells only accessories, people desperate for technical support for their iPod had been calling for help.

"We had to withdraw all telephone support," a page on the site says. "We were being used as a free technical support line for the Apple iPod."

People had been driven to call because Apple's free telephone support is generally limited to the first three months of ownership. Also, if the volume of calls to the Apple support line is too heavy, callers are redirected to the Apple Web site. Another alternative, assuming the geography works in your favor, is to visit an Apple store and consult a technician.

Amazon sees no reason to apologize for its decision to leave the customer-service phone number off its Web site. "We've found that customers really do appreciate the self-service features we've got," said Craig Berman, an Amazon spokesman.

Not everyone agrees. An underground movement to publicize Amazon's customer-service number, 800-201-7575, along with other numbers for Amazon noted on Ms. Hobbs's site, has spread across the Web. (A reporter's call to the number this week produced a human within a few minutes, but only after a recording suggested a visit to the Web site instead.)

eBay, another Internet giant, likewise has no customer-service number listed on its site. Instead, like Amazon, eBay asks its customers to fill out an online form, and they receive a response in 24 to 48 hours, said Hani Durzy, an eBay spokesman.

"We've worked to make sure customer support is dealing with community issues as quickly and effectively as possible, and this is the best system we've come up with," Mr. Durzy said. (eBay does provide a phone number to a subset of its power sellers who qualify for phone-based service.)

True desperation leads some enterprising consumers to look up the name, address and phone number -- often complete with a contact name -- under which a company's domain name is registered on the Web, through the Whois lookup service. Yet some companies, aware of this ploy, no longer provide more than a minimum of information when registering a site.

"I noticed Amazon has taken off most of its references in the Whois database," said Peter Flynn, Ms. Flynn's father and a computer consultant in Cork.

Mr. Flynn occasionally goes a step farther, drilling into a Web site's inner workings to look through the HTML code in case contact information is revealed. But when he used these various schemes to find a phone number for everythingipod.co.uk, Mr. Flynn was stumped.

"It appears they don't want to be traced," he said. "A lot of people want to do business on the Web only, and they don't want people calling them."

Sometimes the pursuit of a human can require travel. When planning a recent trip to Brazil, Randy Cook, an elementary school teacher in Sonoma, Calif., went to the Web site of the Consulate General of Brazil in San Francisco and downloaded a visa application. When he wasn't sure how to answer a question, he looked for a customer-service number for the consulate in San Francisco.

"I listened to a message that gave a number to call to talk to an actual person," he said. "So I tried this number and received a scratchy-sounding message in Portuguese only, which ended with an alternate number to call. But it went by so fast and my Portuguese was so poor that I couldn't get it."

So Mr. Cook took a day off work and made the hour drive to San Francisco to go to the consulate in search of a person.

Mrs. Meyer, 82, remembers well the days, long before touch-tone phones, when a customer-service phone number was promptly answered by a person. A friendly person.

"The way it used to be, you'd ring the number up and a person would pick it up and ask you, 'What can we do for you?'" Mrs. Meyer said, as if describing life on Mars.

Yet she, too, is now victim to automation. Several months ago, Mrs. Meyer's Amana refrigerator began to lose its capacity to chill, a problem complicated by the fact that the service contract was with someone besides Amana. Mrs. Meyer spent hours at a time punching numbers into the phone. "I dialed this number, then pushed that number, then pushed this number again," she said.

Finally, once Mrs. Meyer got through, "a very, very nice gentleman came out and fixed it," and all was well.

The same is true of Mrs. Meyer's medical prescriptions and her banking service. "You never, never speak to a person," she said. "I have a lot of patience, but not that much."

Sometimes Mrs. Meyer's frustration reaches the point where she simply starts speaking into the phone, human or no human at the other end.

"I'll just talk to the phone, anyway," she said. "I say, 'I've already pushed this number.' Of course, you're just talking to yourself. It's sad."

Mr. Garcia, from the consumer affairs group, said that he planned to stick to his guns; that it was in a company's best interests to make sure a customer could get through to a person. "Because if they can solve your problem, the chances are really high that you'll be a satisfied customer," he said.

Mr. Garcia said his organization helped put out a consumer resource handbook published by the General Services Administration. The handbook, which includes a directory of corporations, with many phone numbers for customer service, along with e-mail and Web addresses, is available online at pueblo.gsa.gov/crh/corpormain.shtml.

Sometimes happy accidents occur. Phil Bernstein, of Portland, Ore., a radio station advertising representative, deals with many business owners who have set up elaborate screening systems designed to limit a caller's access.

In the course of one memorable attempt, Mr. Bernstein managed to get through to the president of a mattress

outlet. Usually when calling this number, Mr. Bernstein got only as far as an assistant, who decided whether to put the call through.

But one day he inadvertently hit the star key, which took him to an automated company directory. It invited him to spell his target's last name, and he was put straight through. Mr. Bernstein could hardly believe his good fortune.

"Hi," I said, 'It's Phil Bernstein with KEX Radio.' There was a long pause and the president of the company asked, 'How did you get to me?'

"I explained about hitting the star key by mistake and spelling his name in the company directory," Mr. Bernstein said. "There was another pause, and then he said quietly, 'Don't ever do that again.'"

Photos: FRUSTRATED -- When Randy Cook of Sonoma, Calif., couldn't get assistance over the phone, he took a day off work to seek help in person. (Photo by Dan Krauss for The New York Times)(pg. G5); (Photo by Ignacio Rodriguez)(pg. G1)

Document NYTF000020041230e0cu0000y

© 2005 Dow Jones Reuters Business Interactive LLC (trading as Factiva). All rights reserved.