

# Your call is important to us

*If a customer services adviser is going to 'attend to your call shortly', why not put up a set of shelves, bathe the twins, catalogue your CD collection and regrout the bathroom.*

*You'll have plenty of time, says Dr Leandro Herrero*

**W**elcome to HGG Customer Services. To enable us to process your enquiry more efficiently, please key in your unique 19-digit customer services ID number using your keypad.

Well, I have a problem. I don't know my unique 19-digit customer services ID number off by heart and I don't have it written down on a piece of paper that I can stick in front of my nose. I am beginning to sense this is not good news.

"Your ID number has not been recognised, please try again."

Of course it hasn't, my friend (at this stage a remote probability, but still one) because I haven't done anything yet.

"Please listen carefully to the following menu..."

I somehow managed to bypass that first bit, great!

"For sales enquiries, press one; for technical support, press two; for problems in using our latest hi-tech website press three, for..."

My index finger is ready to press the magic number, whenever the magic number is given, with the trepidation of a

Houston control centre officer about to activate the launch of a space rocket.

"For offers updates, press eleven, for other queries press twelve..."

Funnily enough my index finger is still in an extreme state of readiness but a magic number describing what I need – a human

being called David or Trevor or Jane to speak to, somebody with an actual birth certificate not an avatar or a digital mouth – has not been offered.

It's been five minutes so far. The menu repeats itself like a digital parrot.

"For sales enquiries, press one..."

Let's try technical support, it's bound to have a techie at the other end solving problems. I press two.

"Welcome to technical support. Listen carefully to the following menu. For home support, press one; for business support, press two; for XFG sys-

tems, press three; for other enquiries, press four."

Well, the decision tree has now left Complexity Theory territory, that's good news – let's try business support, they may pay more attention to business than to home. Here we go. Two.

"Welcome to business technical support..."

Oh no! Another digital parrot and another decision tree.

"To enable us to process your enquiry more efficiently, please key in your unique 19-digit customer services ID number using your keypad."

I've bypassed that one before! This is revenge! Okay, I'll keep silent.

"Your ID number has not been recognised. Please try again."

(Silence.)

"Your ID number has not been recognised, please try again."

(Silence and systolic blood pressure up two points.)

"Please hold the line, a customer services adviser will be with you shortly."

Bingo! I've beaten the system! The digital parrot has been thwarted and I can speak to a Jane, Mandy, Peter or Liza.

It's been ten minutes now.

"Please hold the line, a customer services adviser will be with you shortly."

Suddenly the whole room (by now I've put the telephone on hands-free and am busying myself elsewhere) is flooded with Tchaikovsky's majestic Sixth Symphony which, as everybody knows, was written solely for use as globalised on-hold music. It's performed by the Customer Services All Things Philharmonic.

"Your call is important to us, please hold, a customer services adviser will be with you shortly."

Tchaikovsky continues for another eternal forty-five seconds.

"Your call is important to us, please hold, a customer services adviser will be with you shortly."

How important is it, really? I say it out loud, and as if there were a real person inside my handset, and as if I genuinely believed they were going to cut off the music and respond, "Very, very important," or something equally convincing.

"Your call is important to us, please hold, a customer services adviser will be with you shortly."

It's been fifteen minutes now, more or less. The music continues. Hey, wait a minute, I've heard that movement before, and I'm pretty sure the Sixth hasn't got an extra movement which is a repeat of the previous one.

Suddenly, a breakthrough. It's the same digital parrot but the script has changed.

"Have you checked our website, double-u double-u double-u hgg technologies dot com for

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**The customer revolution, if there ever was one, died the day digital parrots took over the world and promiscuously procreated in call centres; the day that we started hearing: "Your call is important to us"**

the answer to your question? Why not browse our latest offers at the same time...”

I can't stand any more. What if I press zero? Surely this is safe enough, the telephone isn't going to explode or anything, yes, zero is safe. Zero.

“Welcome to HGG customer services. To enable us to process your enquiry more efficiently, please key in your unique 19-digit customer services ID number using your keypad.”

I am a killer, no, worse, a serial killer, a very, very dangerous murderer, don't approach me. I am going to press five and then six, and then another number until I find Lucy, or Mandy, or Maria. I press eight.

“Please listen carefully to the following menu. For complaints, press one; for offers updates, press two; for...”

Actually I desperately need something like “for a psychiatrist press one, for the Samaritans press two, for a priest press three,” but all I get is another parrot. Okay, I will go back to my strategy of silence. If I stop breathing, something inside the chip inside the telephone will send a message to the managing director of the call centre and they will come to my rescue.

“Your call is important to us, please hold, a customer services adviser will be with you shortly.”

I press one, and then nine, and then five.

The message is now truncated but *helas!* it is a change for the better.

“To speak directly to an adviser, press one; to go back to the main menu, press two.”

It's a miracle – can you see, sense, taste, feel, smell, the transcendental beauty of the word “directly”, d-i-r-e-c-t-l-y? This is beautiful. Houston Control, Houston Control, problem about to be solved, index finger ready, target key number one, ready, five, four, three, two, one. One.

“The customer service centre is now closed, our office hours are nine to six, Monday to Friday...”

I am twenty-eight minutes older. I can hear my amigdalohypocampus system going bleeb, bleeb, bleeb. I am a few thousand neurones short with irreparable damage to the ability of my cortex to control the archetypal emotions that all my ancestors have passed on to me in little DNA rosaries. I am probably dead. No, I am not dead, I am mad. I genuinely, sincerely, convincingly believe that if I keep pressing buttons, at some point the customer service centre will be open again, even if it's tomorrow morning, and then, hey, I'll get Jane.

The sad part of this story is that it is true. Even sadder, it is not even funny. Actually this is the saddest article I have ever written for *Scrip Magazine*.

The customer revolution, if there ever was one, died the day digital parrots took over the world and promiscuously procreated in call centres; the day that we started hearing “Your call is important to us”. The customer revolution is

... press 63, or if you wish to hear the list again, press eeaargh!

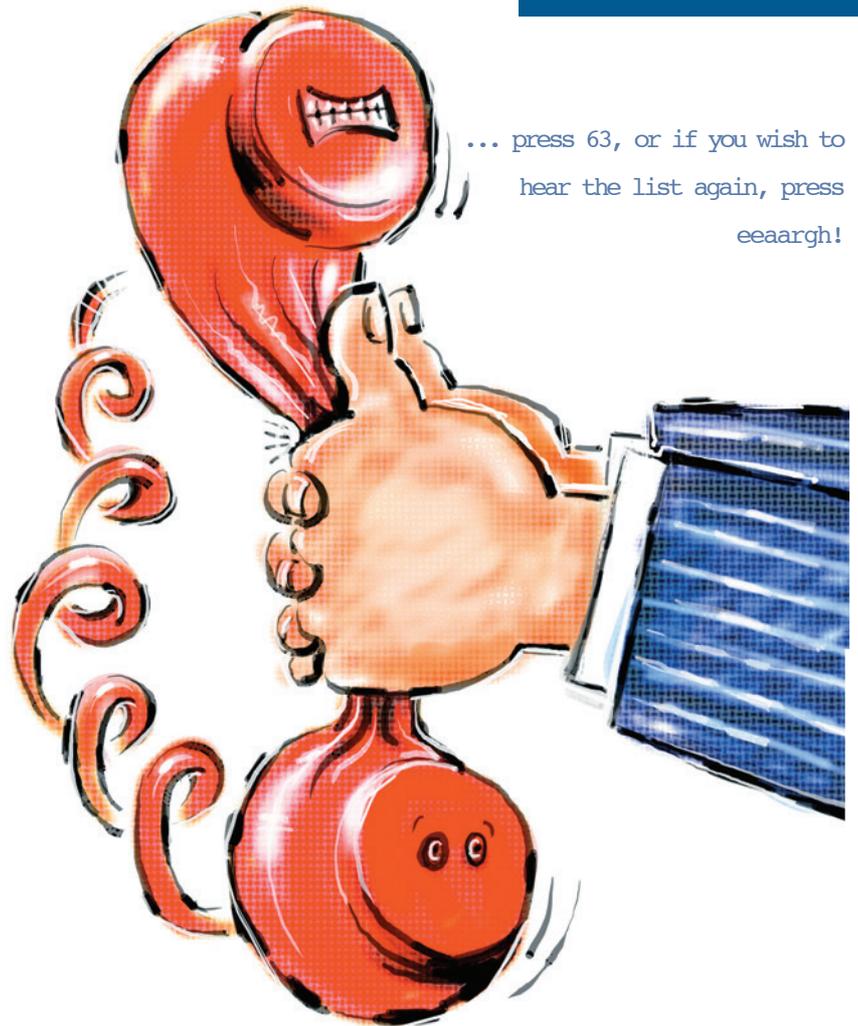


Illustration by Rob Wilcockson

dead. A death certificate is signed every time you can't get Mandy, Peter, Trevor or Jane on the phone and you listen to Tchaikovsky's Sixth in a queue system.

Even sadder, if you ever get to Mandy, what Mandy says may be incredible, inaudible, utter nonsense or no better than the digital parrot. Mandy will be hooked to a screen and navigating through an algorithm of questions and answers. Mandy has been programmed to avoid the use of judgement. Mandy's job has been McDonaldised so that it can be repeated and repeated with minimal training.

Mandy's algorithms on screen are stupid (all algorithms are stupid, people are supposed to be clever using them) and dictate for example that she always (a-l-w-a-y-s) finishes with articulated, psychomotor routines such as “Is there anything else I can help you with?”. Because the old customer revolution says that ‘is-there-anything-I-can-help-you-with’ is a-l-w-a-y-s intrinsically a good thing, an expression of care, compassion, empathy, interest and declaration of love for the customer.

Never mind that you have just told Mandy to tell her boss that the company stinks, that you are about to sue the managing director, that they have screwed up your order, wasted your time, taken you for a ride, insulted your intelligence and, as a matter of fact, for the record, lied to you, and you think they deserve – please, Mandy, make sure that you take note – total extinction from the face

of the earth. Mandy, never mind, finishes: “Thank you, sir, I appreciate your call, sir, is-there-anything-else-I-can-help-you-with? (Please, Mandy, see somebody, get a de-programming course. It works for people running away from cults. You are part of one. And I am very, very, very sorry for you.)

My laptop screen broke a few months ago in circumstances that I am ashamed to explain but that have to do with a carpark and a car reversing over a bag I had absentmindedly left on the ground. I was driving that car. Never mind, it was a tough day. I called the manufacturer, I used my never-before-used insurance (with some secret inner excitement at the idea of using this insurance at last) and arranged for what was going to be a straightforward next-day replacement, as the contract said.

Next day became next week. I called every day to track the progress of the missing screen that, I was assured (despite my suspicions), was not being manufactured in Patagonia. Every day I got a completely different, non-matching version of what was happening. On one occasion I called twice in the space of an hour. The first man told me I would “have it tomorrow, because it has been dispatched today”. When I called again to check the delivery time, a second man told me that the screen had been with me for the last three days.

With me? With me! How foolish of me not to have noticed! Where was it? In my bedroom? In a closet? Under the sink?

There was no way to establish a rational dialogue, because the man’s screen said...

I am convinced there is nobody in all those call centres, only machines programmed with Irish, Scottish or Bangladeshi accents (just to make it difficult for me). And they lie. And they get away with murder. Because there is no customer revolution, customer power or customer-centric stuff. It’s a lie. Nobody cares. Period. No call is important to us.

PS: I have the key to strategic success in the digital-parrot-we-want-you-to-believe-that-your-call-is-important-to-us economy. Without attending any US\$30,000 Competitive Advantage Course or having to put up with lectures on maximising shareholder value via customer-centric strategies that enhance sustainable competitive advantages across all your core competencies. Here is the secret: bring the real Mandy-human back. SM

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