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Ballard: Escape phone labyrinth, talk to a person

By LARRY BALLARD
WORKBYTES COLUMNIST

This is a story about a guy named Me.

Journalism professors always warned that bimonthly columnists, even those with readership that extends from the corner of Sixth and Euclid avenues to near southern Ankeny, should refrain from writing about themselves.

"No one wants to read personal anecdotes and self-serving observations," they'd say.

Then again, they also said: "Web, schmeb."

That's why Workbytes will break with tradition this morning to share a personal story that illustrates a growing problem in the business world.

More about that growing problem later. First, a few paragraphs of self-indulgent background:

My brother and his wife, through no fault of their own, live in Lincoln, Neb. For Christmas, I bought them front-row tickets to a performance in Omaha by a washed-up, unreliable comedian who shall remain nameless until my refund is finalized.

I was informed by e-mail a few hours before the concert that the aforementioned funnyman had abruptly canceled. (His Schmeb site said that he had checked into rehab for a few weeks.)

My brother and his wife, of course, were already on the road to Omaha. To complicate matters, I had used an online travel agent to book them a swanky room at a hotel near the theater.

"No problem," my understanding sibling said. "We'll just check into the hotel and find something else to do."

Alas, when they reached the hotel, there was no reservation, no record of prepayment and no idea on the part of the desk clerk how such a thing could ever happen in a trillion years.

Squeaky wheeling

Tips on making complaints

USE HONEY: Ticket agents, hotel clerks and other service personnel typically react to tantrums with indifference.

FIND A FIXER: If the employee you contact lacks the authority to remedy the issue, ask for a supervisor.

CUT TO THE CHASE: Arm yourself with specifics and lay them out succinctly. Include your expectations. Use the same strategy with letters and e-mails.

ENLIST A REFEREE: Go-betweens include the Better Business Bureau and professional groups, such as the Direct Marketing Association.

FIRE THE BIG GUNS: Call the appropriate licensing bureau, consumer agency or state attorney general's office.

PLEAD YOUR CASE: Small claims court and civil lawsuits are a (sometimes expensive) option. A lawyer can tell you whether your case has a chance.

Sources: scambusters.org;
Kiplinger's newsletter

The result, my friend David Beinhacker would later explain, was a first-class case of what is scientifically known as Customer Rage.

Beinhacker works for Customer Care Measurement & Consulting of Alexandria, Va. He studies how companies respond to consumer complaints, and how often the complainers get satisfaction.

The 2005 Customer Rage Study found that 62 percent of dissatisfied customers (including me) try to handle the problem with a telephone call. About 43 percent of them (including me) end up with an "extreme level of customer rage." (The other 57 percent, I assume, are still on hold.)

I called the travel agent and was instructed to punch in my confirmation information, after which I was told in a soothing, robotic voice that everything was in order.

"To continue, press #."

It was a slippery step into the morass of automated customer service. By the time I got to: "Press 8 if you've completely forgotten why you called in the first place; press 9 if you have celebrated at least one birthday since placing this call," I had lost any shred of patience left.

(The travel company also shall remain nameless, except for the prefix: "Those lousy @% \$&*#s . . .").

There followed several hours of calls to at least six numbers supplied by hotel employees, my credit-card company and the booking agent's own Schmeb site.

Each call began: "To confirm a reservation, press 1 now."

I only wish I had known Paul English then.

English, a software engineer in Arlington, Mass., is fast becoming famous for his ability to break through automated telephone menus to get a flesh-and-blood customer service representative you can actually scream at.

His efforts started a few years ago when he tried to reach his cell-phone service provider and got trapped in the same automated hell.

"Plus, it always bugged me to see how my dad became unable to use the phone when the computers started taking over. So part of my motivation for this fight is in his name," English told Workbytes.

I won't give away all of his secrets, but English has figured out how to crack the phone systems of several big companies. With a few taps on the keypad or a well-timed voice prompt, he is able to cut the crap and hook up with a real, live person — every time.

He posted the "cheat sheet" on his blog, paulenglish.com, "and the thing took off like crazy."

It's one of the most forwarded links on the Internet.

And no wonder. It works.

I employed his techniques in a follow-up call to the travel company.

When I finally got through, I hung up on those lousy @%\$&*#s.
test

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