

Automation – Get Used to It

I never thought the day would come when I'd say I preferred being pestered by a real person on the telephone, but it beats the heck out of robo-calling that seems to be popular these days.

We have eight incoming phone lines where I work, and one day I came in to find eight identical voice mail messages from a man who seemed very concerned about the "excessive balances" we were carrying on our credit card.

Last week, a nice robo-lady called me at home to inform me that my property taxes would increase 20% to 30% if I voted for the \$20 million conservation bond. She didn't seem to notice that I was loudly challenging her math skills. (As it turns out, she was referring to a percentage increase of the existing increase; a minor detail that a real person might have been able to explain).

Similarly, most large companies use voice recognition software to automate their routine functions, but that always seems to slow things down. For example, it used to take me about 30 seconds with a real person at an 800 number to find out if my United flight was still on schedule – now it takes an additional three minutes out of my life that I'll never get back.

Many newspapers including the Press-Citizen have adopted this type of system for people reporting a missing newspaper. It actually works pretty well, if you give it what it wants when it wants it.

Human beings being what they are, this doesn't always happen. As soon as I realized I was going to be talking to a machine I cleared my throat, which it accepted as my first response and a recorded female voice said pleasantly, "I'll transfer you to someone to help with that."

I was thinking that maybe they have enough customers like me to retain an Otolaryngologist on staff to deal with callers exhibiting excess phlegm.

After listening to soothing music on hold for several minutes I decided that the Otolaryngologist was on break, so I called back in. This time I was prepared, so all of the information was properly recorded, and a replacement paper appeared shortly thereafter.

Later, when LuAnn discovered I had used the automated reporting system she said, "That's the one I was yelling at last week." Oh yeah, I remember now.

Speech recognition machines in general have trouble deciphering her responses – her voice seems to have the same frequency as white noise. If you're having trouble sleeping, I'll send her over to talk to you continuously for ten minutes – you'll be out like a light. It sure works for me, even in the middle of the day.

Worse, she likes to answer a question with a question. After verifying our address, the auto attendant asked her if she'd like a replacement newspaper, at which point it expects a "yes" or a "no." What it got from LuAnn was, "Why do you think I'm calling, you stupid machine? Of course I want a replacement!"

She eventually got her message across, the newspaper showed up on our doorstep, and automation triumphed once more. We all may as well get used to it.