

Press 1 for Customer Service...

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Three phone calls to three businesses yield three different results... and we rate them

Telephone Customer Service: Press 1 to wait on the line for a real person...

By Suzanne Boles

Remember when we took it for granted that, when calling a business, a ringing signal meant that we'd get to talk to a real live person? Today, our efforts to find a human being at the other end of the phone line are often thwarted by lengthy sales pitches, followed by numerous dial prompts. And if you're lucky enough to eventually connect with someone, customer service can range from acceptable to less than satisfactory.

Straight Goods got tired of hearing anonymous voices telling us to press 1, or 2, or 79. And when we heard "this call may be monitored for quality assurance" one too many times, we decided to turn the telephone tables and do some monitoring ourselves. The following is a log kept of three business-related phone calls by the author. Press 1 for Bell Canada, press 2 for Bank of Montreal, or press 3 for Colgate-Palmolive Canada...

Organization: Bell Canada

Question: How can I reduce my phone bill?

Reason: I recently called Bell to sign up for their First Rate 24 hours plan, hoping this would reduce my phone bill as most of my long-distance calls are made during the day. Despite this change, my bill this month was \$105.62.

The prompts: Bilingual recorded message, press 1 for English. I enter my phone number, as requested, and am greeted by a preamble about additional services, then 5 more choices. I pick number two and am given six more choices. I choose the last option, "press zero to speak to a client representative at any time."

First contact: Lenny responds quickly and I explain my problem. After his lengthy explanation of the services I now have, he suggests I try the First Rate Flat evenings and weekends plan. I explain that I make most of my long-distance calls during the day. He kindly tells me there's nothing else I can do. I ask him about my monthly service charges and he offers to put me through to the marketing department.

Second contact: After a two-minute wait, a woman answers. I ask her for a breakdown of my monthly service charges and learn that, while half of these are attributed to additional services I've subscribed to, the remainder are required to maintain necessary services. She suggests I eliminate a \$5.25 monthly phone rental charge by purchasing their top-of-the-line telephone on a rent-to-own plan at \$8.10 a month for two years, certainly not a way to reduce my bill. I state this and she agrees, then tells me that there

isn't any other way to reduce the bill. She politely ends the conversation by saying she's sorry.

Total time: 7 minutes.

Rating: Knowledgeable, pleasant customer service reps. Too bad for me that their products aren't as good.

Organization: Bank of Montreal

Question: How can I link my Master Card (MC) to my Web Banking accounts?

Reason: To enhance my existing Web Banking services.

The prompts: Recorded welcome is followed by a lengthy preamble about the deadline for RRSP contributions, then a request to enter the 10 numbers (after the first six numbers) on my bank card and press the number sign. My finger slips and I input incorrectly. "That was not a valid response", followed by a more detailed explanation about what to do and the fact that number sign "is often referred to as the pound key." I'm successful this time, am prompted to enter by password followed by the number sign, which is followed by two choices, neither of which I want. I hesitate and am given the option to repeat the two choices or end the call. I randomly pick one of the two choices. The following four choices don't apply to me. Frustrated, I press zero and hear "a direct banking manager will be right with you, please stay with us."

First contact: Jeff answers politely. I make my request and ask him a question. "I think so," he says, not really sure. Dead air... dead air. "Are you there?" I ask. "Yep." He asks me for my MC number, slowly inputting each numeral as he mumbles them quietly, then says it's done. I check out the Web site. No MC.

Second contact: Same series of directions, I dial 0 as soon as I can. Mario answers politely. I explain my problem. He confirms the MC number isn't there, asks a few more questions and then asks for the number, inputting each numeral as he also mumbles them quietly. He gets a rejection notice several times (mumbling this under his breath) and asks me if I already linked my MC to online banking. I tell him that's what he's supposed to be doing for me. He tries again, and tells me that it's linked now. He's right.

Total time: Total for both calls: 12 minutes

Rating: Front-line customer service reps could probably use more training about company products, services and telephone etiquette.

Organization: Colgate-Palmolive Canada

Question: What's the difference between Colgate Sensation Whitening product and Crest Extra Whitening product?

Reason: Want to know which product is safer for my teeth.

The prompts: Bilingual recorded message tells me to press 1 for English, followed by 4 more options including one to dial 0 and speak with a consumer consultant. A recorded message tells me to please hold, followed by a quiet musical interlude which lasts less than a minute.

First contact: Cheerful female voice answers, "Good afternoon Colgate-Palmolive, bonjour." I ask my question. She explains that, since Crest is not a Colgate-Palmolive product, she doesn't know what the ingredients in Crest are so she can't tell me the difference between the two products, then explains the ingredients in the Colgate product and how it works and that "it works well." I ask if it's harmful to my teeth and she assures me it's not, then asks if there's anything else and politely says goodbye.

Total time: 2 minutes

Rating: Polite and knowledgeable customer service rep. Other companies might consider checking this one out.

Bonus for Straight Goods readers: 10 Fun Things to Do While You're on Hold

1. Play "Mary had a little lamb" on your telephone keypad.
2. Play anagrams with each button on the phone. Hint: you can spell "cab" on # 2.
3. Let the handset dangle almost to the ground, and watch it spin as the cord uncoils.
4. Twist the cord.
5. Repeat #3.
6. Pretend you're Regis Philbin helping a millionaire contestant use their "phone-a-friend" lifeline. When the rep comes to the phone, ask "is that your final answer"?
7. Play Name That Tune along with the musical hold.
8. See if adjusting the channel on your cordless phone actually makes a difference in the reception.
9. Go to your other line; redial the number, and see if you get faster service on the second line.
10. Take a nap.

Suzanne Boles is a freelance journalist, editor and business writer living in London, Ontario. She is hoping that making consumers and businesses aware of the importance of quality customer service will start to rub off.

LETTER TO THE EDITOR: February 2000

Where have all the employees gone?

I found Suzanne Boles article on telephone service very appropriate as I encountered a similar experience the same day. The only thing that makes it worse is to find out that the person you are speaking to doesn't directly work for the company you called. They are temps under contract. How much loyalty or knowledge do these people have? Whatever happened to companies actually having employees to answer a phone and give customer service?

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