

Beacon Hill Byline – by Mary Rogeness

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Whatever happened to ‘May I help you?’

The lawmakers on the Commerce and Labor Committee took a break last week from the heavy issues of lockouts, unemployment and the state of the economy. We held a hearing on a petition submitted by one Sidney S. Werlin a private citizen with a complaint.

He does not like answering machines, voice mail and interactive telephone sites. And he seems to have struck a chord with many consumers in the state.

Mr. Werlin used the provision of our state's constitution that allows citizens to propose general legislation. His bill would require that “any company based in Massachusetts and having twenty-five or more employees must provide direct access to a live human operator through its main listed number.”

It seems that he has spent too much time on the telephone trying to elicit information from recordings that can't respond to his questions.

You know the routine. You call a store to find out if it carries your typewriter ribbon and the phone is answered by a recording that tells you the hours of operation. In a particularly frustrating experience, Werlin told of calling Boston Garden to find out if an event had been canceled because of the blizzard. The interactive phone system led him through a maze of options, none of which contained that information. It finally returned him to the initial greeting.

I have mentioned this bill in several conversations and have discovered that everyone seems to have a personal story of frustration at trying to talk to a machine. I met my match when a particular recording wanted me to enter the name of a person whose name I could not spell. I invite you to share your own tale of woe with me, although I must warn you that you might have to tell it to my answering machine!

Some of you have developed your own methods for combating the nonresponsive machinery. The most useful method is to call from a rotary phone, or to pretend that is the case. If you refrain from responding to the initial command to “press one now” -- you can generally talk to an actual person.

If you are faced with a particularly difficult phone system, voice your unhappiness to the first real person you can find. Any business will be forced to respond to such consumer unrest. And you can certainly hang up if the computer has initiated a call to you.

In the information age we live in, we are most likely to be faced with growing-use of computerized phone systems. And, honestly, it is often easier to conduct business with a machine than it is to listen to the refrain saying “your call will be answered in the order in which it was received.”

We have come a long way since the days of dialing the operator for all long distance connections, moving first to direct dial and then to the added automation of credit card calling. And eventually we will most likely master the new challenges of interacting with the telephone. But until that time, I hope the services and businesses we deal with will show the courtesy of providing a real human voice to help us out.