

Beacon Hill Byline

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Controlling Nuisance Marketers

The beginning of then new year, new century and new millennium seems like a good time to make life a little easier by clearing away some of the clutter from daily life. This week's Byline offers some tips to reduce the quantity of junk mail and the frequency of dinnertime telemarketing, nuisances that make life more uncomfortable than it should be.

The information age is upon us. Anyone who buys through a catalog, uses a credit card or even has a listed telephone can become the target of other sales organizations.

The widespread sale of personal data is a commonplace. Even so, when sales techniques interfere with your daily life, you can take steps to reclaim your privacy. It is not an easy process, but should bear fruit over time.

How do marketing organizations find out where you live? They can buy data bases from other companies or from national clearinghouses. The recent news coverage of Boston's public television station WGBH supplying its subscriber list to the Democratic National Committee is one public example of list proliferation. I had a recent phone call from a constituent who receives dozens of political solicitations, all mailed to a misspelled name. Although he has not responded to any of them, a master list is apparently being widely distributed.

The first step you can take is to write the Direct Marketing Association (DMA) and ask them to remove your name from their lists. This organization has 3,600 member businesses. While the DMA does not require businesses to comply, you should still see a significant decrease by the next catalog season.

Contact the customer service departments of those companies who are sending you junk mail and ask them to take you off their lists. The customer service department can often supply the name and address of the company that originally sold your name to them. If so, contact the supplier and request that they remove your name from their list.

Next, you should contact the companies you willingly do business with - credit card companies, mail order companies, or charities. Ask them not to sell, rent or otherwise share your information with others. Also, before you begin new business relationships, find out the company's privacy policy and make your requests in advance.

Companies with caller ID systems in place can record your phone number for future use every time you call. You can establish a private number with the phone company or begin a call with *67 to hide the number, but those measures will not work if you are calling toll free numbers.

The 1991 Telephone Consumer Protection Act protects against unwanted telemarketing. Under this law you may request to be put on a "Do Not Call List." Except for nonprofit organizations and pollsters, telemarketers may call only between 8 a.m. and 9 p.m. Callers must identify themselves, their organization and contact information; the organization must provide written information about its "Do Not Call Policy" if requested; and companies may not send unsolicited prerecorded messages.

Complaints may be filed with the Attorney General's Office or the FCC Common Carrier Bureau. You can write to the Telephone Preference Service to have your name removed from many national telemarketing lists. For more information you may contact the Massachusetts Office of Consumer Affairs Hot Line, 1-888-283-3757.

Most importantly, be aware of the information you give out. Completing surveys, filling out warranty cards and using supermarket discount cards deliver personal information right into the hands of data brokers.

Several states have enacted a law that sanction telemarketers that ignore do not call requests, but that is one law we do not yet have in Massachusetts. Let me know if you would like me to work on such a law.

Best wishes for a Happy, Prosperous and Private New Year.