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Tired of Phone Menus? Press 1.

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Tuesday, February 24, 2004; Page C10

You phone the customer-service number to ask about an invoice mistake or to complain about a service problem, and you get routed into a quagmire of confusing automated choices. A synthetic voice reads the options. None seems appropriate.

You try one anyway and get trapped in an endless menu maze that makes you desperate to speak to a human being. You press 0 and are put on hold in an operator queue for 25 minutes, or are looped back to the beginning of the cursed menu, or, more infuriating, disconnected.

Communicating with companies through automated customer-service technologies increasingly feels like customer disservice, according to a new survey.

"Ninety percent of consumers stated they wanted nothing to do with an automated telephone system," says Scott Broetzmann, president of Customer Care Measurement & Consulting, an Alexandria firm that surveys corporations and consumers on topics of customer-service contention. "They just don't like it."

The most telling finding: At least 50 percent of those surveyed have become so aggravated that they were willing to pay an additional charge for customer service that avoids going through an automated telephone system. Selling customer service is gaining acceptance, which indicates "it is really tough and getting tougher for consumers to wade through this stuff," says Broetzmann.

CCMC surveyed more than 1,000 consumers late last year and found that 60 percent are "less than satisfied" with automated consumer-service technologies -- which includes not only phone systems but also e-mail and the Internet. Particular sore points include the length of automated messages, the ease of reaching a live agent and the clarity of the options.

Consumer inconvenience wasn't the idea when these new technologies first caught on. Just the opposite: The thinking in the business world even four years ago was that companies could provide services on whatever technological "channel" the customer preferred -- online, automated telephone systems or in person.

"The initial strategic approach was if you are going to be customer-driven, you better provide service on all channels at all times," says Broetzmann.

But as the technology advanced, the focus fell from once-lofty consumer-friendly goals to -- no surprise here -- the bottom line.
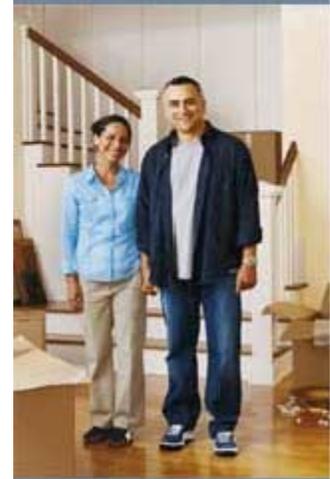
"The idea that companies were going to be customer-focused and provide this whiz-bang 'Star Wars' kind of service, that really isn't what most companies are doing now," says Broetzmann. "Instead, they are pushing customers into their lowest-cost channels to reduce their cost of servicing them. It is much cheaper to service somebody through self-service or automated telephone systems than to have them talk to a live body."

It costs a company an average of 65 cents when a customer helps himself online, according to the Gartner Group, an information technology analyst. The cost for self-service via an automated phone system averages $1.85; for a live customer rep, $4.50.

Most consumers see the new technology more as a barrier than a benefit.

One of the biggest problems and complaints, says Broetzmann, is that the automated technologies too often don't complete transactions, because of technological glitches and customer confusion. That leads to "ping-ponging": customers calling back trying to find a live representative or trying other means of contacting the company.

The survey found that more than half of all consumers have to use some other channel to complete the transaction.

"That's bad news. It costs companies more money," says Broetzmann. "And by the time the consumer gets to the third channel, the chances of him being satisfied are slim and none."

For purchasing and complaining, 70 and 85 percent, respectively, preferred traditional methods to automated technologies.

"More than three-quarters said, 'I am frequently frustrated by the ways companies use technology to avoid talking to me.' And this belief that 'companies don't want to talk to me' probably is a true finding," says Broetzmann, explaining that some companies try to identify their most valued and profitable customers and service them in better ways than they service others.

"Depending on who you are," he says, "they may or may not want to talk to you."

Got questions? A consumer complaint? A helpful tip? E-mail details to oldenburgd@washpost.com or write Don Oldenburg, The Washington Post, 1150 15th St. NW, Washington, D.C. 20071.

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