

Kiplinger.com

November 28, 2005

 [License or reprint this article](#)

YOUR MONEY

Cut Down the Phone Tree

by Cameron Huddleston

Tired of being forced into the abyss of automated phone systems every time you call an organization? Here's how to reach an actual human.

Earlier this year, Paul English decided he'd had enough.

He had called his phone-service provider, Verizon, in an attempt to talk to a customer service representative. He obediently followed all the prompts in the automated phone menu -- only to get disconnected before he ever reached a human. He tried again, navigating his way through Verizon's phone tree maze. "It was excruciating how many menus I went through," says English of Arlington, Mass.

He had a similar experience with his bank, Fleet. Press 1, press 2, press 3, enter your 16-digit ATM number, press 1 again. By the time he reached a human and the person asked for his ATM number, which he'd already entered, English said, "I wanted to reach through the phone and strangle the person."

Instead of just getting mad, though, the 42-year-old software engineer did something about it.

He figured out how to beat the system at ten companies that infuriated him most and posted his interactive voice response, or IVR, cheat sheet in March on his Web log. It was a hit instantly. Readers of his blog started writing in with shortcuts they'd discovered through other IVR systems.

Now his [IVR cheat sheet](#) has tips on how to reach a human at 110 organizations. And he's got 200 more waiting to be posted once they've been verified, he says.

English says he is surprised how popular the IVR cheat sheet has become. The page on his site has gotten more than 1 million page views, he's been interviewed on MSNBC, ABC World News Tonight, NBC Nightly News and for *People* magazine, and he even gets calls from company employees telling him how to navigate their IVR system.

But for anyone who has ever dealt with the maze of a computerized service line (and that's most of us), it comes as no surprise how popular English's cheat sheet is. These automated systems frequently are consumers' number-one source of frustration, says Scott Broetzmann, the founder of Customer Care Alliance and president of Customer Care Measurement and Consulting, which conduct customer satisfaction studies.

The rise of IVR

In a yet-to-be released study by Customer Care Alliance, fewer than half of 100 companies called had

the words "talk to" or "speak with" in their automated greetings, Broetzmann said. Yet, what most consumers want is to have a conversation, he says. "Most automated telephone systems are not designed to encourage conversations," Broetzmann says. "They're set up to process transactions."

Although studies show consumers want to speak with a human, "self service via the phone and Web is here to stay," Broetzmann says.

That's because automated services are cheaper than agent-assisted services, says Brad Cleveland, president of Incoming Calls Management Institute, a call center consulting firm in Annapolis, Md. Web transactions cost organizations 25 to 50 cents each, IVR costs between 35 to 40 cents, and agent-assisted calls usually cost more than \$5 each, he says.

"In an attempt to cut costs, many companies are making it more difficult to reach a person," Cleveland says.

That's why you often cannot just press zero when you call a company to get an operator. In fact, many companies have camouflaged the route to a human so callers are forced to use their automated systems, says Broetzmann.

"Sometimes you press a sequence of digits, or digit #, or digit *," he says. "Sometimes if you stand on your left foot and point at the sun, you might get through."

Or, according to English's IVR cheat sheet, after selecting English, press 2 6 2 4 (with a two second delay between each), if you want to reach a person at the Immigration and Naturalization Service. For Dell Computer service, choose option 1, extension 7266966, option 1, option 4, option 4. To reach a person at IKEA, dial 0 many times fast. If you do it once, or too slow, the menu will repeat itself.

"I wish all companies allowed me to always type "0" to get to a human immediately," English writes on his Web site. That's all a person has to do to talk to someone at Kayak.com, the travel search engine English helped create. Or simply click the feedback button on the kayak.com site, and you'll get a personal reply from English, who is the chief technical officer, or his co-founder.

With most companies, though, using their e-mail system to lodge a complaint or comment is a crapshoot, says Broetzmann. You'll often get an automated response, or none at all, he says.

So if you need to speak to someone quickly, you usually are better off trying your luck with the automated phone system. If you can't find a phone number on a company's Web site, English lists phone numbers for the companies on his IVR cheat sheet -- even the number for Amazon.com, which English said he had to use his own search software to find. If you can't find the number you're looking for on his cheat sheet, English suggests trying your luck with search engines, such as Google.

Reaching a human

Now that you know the self-service system is here to stay, here are some tips to cut through all the layers of menus and reach an actual person. First, check English's [IVR cheat sheet](#) to see if the company or organization you want to reach is among the 110 listed on his Web site.

Otherwise, Cleveland offers this advice:

- **Start by giving the process a chance.** Dial the right number and enter the information requested by the system; the best organizations use that information to handle contacts more effectively. If that doesn't work ...
- **There are usually escape codes,** although they may be more difficult to find than in the past. For example, hitting zero, zero then pound, or saying "agent" once the first menu options are presented will sometimes get you to a person. But first check for a menu alternative that gives you that choice. If unsuccessful, ask the agent you do eventually reach if there is an easier way to get through next time.
- **Avoid busy hours.** Just like the highway system, call centers have rush hours. Monday mornings tend to be the worst; midweek (Tuesday through Thursday) afternoons or evenings are often the best. Ask the organization when, for future contacts, the best times are to call.
- **Give automated services a try.** Like ATM machines at banks and credit/debit card systems at the gas pumps, you may like the organization's automated Web and phone services if you try them.
- **Make your views heard.** If you encounter poor service, send an e-mail, write a letter, or talk to a manager. If an organization provides chronic poor service, take your business elsewhere -- and let them know why you are leaving.

Complain effectively

If and when you do reach a human, don't waste your time ranting about how irritating the phone menu is. Broetzmann says you have to assume the complaints will fall on deaf ears because call center agents handle up to 100 calls a day, hear complaints all the time and have no authority to deal with them.

"Many in the service industry are stressed out, worn out and burnt out, and there hasn't been much they haven't heard," Broetzmann says. "To them, you're just one more angry customer." So the saying "you can attract more flies with honey" applies.

- Don't loose your cool. The quickest way to ensure you won't get what you want is to raise your voice, Broetzmann says.
- Be respectful.
- Be clear about what you want: an apology, a refund, a new product, etc.

For more tips on how to complain effectively, see "Satisfaction Guaranteed" in the January issue of *Kiplinger's Personal Finance*.

This page printed from:

<http://www.kiplinger.com/personalfinance/features/archives/2005/11/phonetree.html>

All contents © 2005 The Kiplinger Washington Editors