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Companies reaching out to the operator

Concerns about loss of angry customers who call for help prompt return of the live lines

By Richard J. Dalton Jr.
Newsday

After Genevieve Millon's freezer door got stuck shut, Amana's automated customer-service system certainly didn't cool her down.

"I went through nonsense with press 1, press 2, press 4," said Millon, of Huntington, N.Y. "This number 1-2-3-4-5-6 doesn't work. I wish they would get a person to answer it."

Call it tone rage -- the anger of those lost in a confusing maze of touch-tone menus.

Now a small but growing number of companies are trying to quell the frustration by reviving a once-common option -- the ability to dial 0 to reach an operator.

"It definitely can be a competitive advantage," said Richard Shapiro, president of the Center for Client Retention, a research organization in Springfield, N.J., focusing on customer satisfaction and loyalty.

Citigroup recently launched an ad campaign for a new credit card, called Citi Simplicity, touting the news that cardholders could "press 0 to speak to a live representative."

"We felt that if we offered this feature on the card, customers would like the card and use the card more," said Antony Jenkins, executive vice president of Citi Cards. The service is available only for its Citi Simplicity cards.

Southwest Airlines doesn't even offer a menu system. Customers always reach a live operator, though sometimes after a wait.

Mindbridge, an intranet software company in Norristown, Pa., recently reduced a complicated menu to four options, and added the ability to dial 0

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for an operator.

Scott Testa, chief operating officer of Mindbridge, said customers had complained to him about the customer-service line via e-mail, with one calling the automated customer-service line "ridiculous."

And, he said, that was among the polite messages. "A couple of them" -- Testa laughs -- "were not that cordial, to say the least."

Mindbridge's typical customer pays \$50,000 to \$100,000 initially and pays three times that figure during the life span of a contract, Testa said. "Literally, we save one customer and this thing pays for itself."

On the other hand, Millon's broken refrigerator didn't fit neatly into any of Amana's menu options.

Amana spokesman John Daggett said the company tried to keep the service line simple by offering just two options on the first menu and five on the second.

Option five on the second menu allows callers to reach an operator.

Daggett said callers can press 0 to reach an operator. But when a reporter pressed 0 while checking the touch-tone menu, the system directed the caller to the company's Web site and then continued with the touch-tone menu. Dialing 0 again brought the operator on the phone.

Scott Broetzmann, president of CCMC, a consulting practice in Alexandria, Va., specializing in customer care, said live agents are 15 to 20 times more expensive than automated calls.

"So many companies have taken the approach that they don't really want to talk to their customers," he said. "They want to cost-save by asking people to self-serve, or they want to redirect people to the Web site."

But the inability to reach a live person is the No. 1 cause of dissatisfaction among customers calling a company, according to a report CCMC will release soon.

"It's technology coming around and biting these companies in the butt," said Jeff Kagan, a telecommunications analyst near Atlanta. "They're risking losing the customer."

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