



A sure-fire way to alienate customers is to keep them on hold and make them listen to piped music when they call your company. **Charles Orton-Jones** explains how smarter operators are changing the record.

HANGING ON THE TELEPHONE

"Hold music is one of the most stressful features of modern life", says Peter Freedman, editor of *Stressbusting*, a journal devoted to improving people's emotional health. "It's meant to placate you, but it drives you nuts. When *Greensleeves* comes on the line yet again, I feel like smashing the phone with a pickaxe."

And this is a guy who makes his living helping people to calm down.

Freedman's not alone. The mere mention of hold music is enough to make most folk swear like footballers. British Gas generated a record number of complaints last year when its billing system collapsed. The first wave of complaints was about bills. The second concerned customers' inability to talk to a member of staff on the telephone. Complaints to the energy regulator grew so numerous that British Gas's managing director, Phil Bentley FCMA, felt obliged to go on national television to apologise for the "inconvenience and stress" caused by the incessant hold music.

So what is hold music doing to your customers? Do you know? Do you care? You should do. A recent poll showed that 69 per cent of consumers would be less likely to purchase a company's products or services if they had been served poorly by one of its call centres. Seven out of ten of those surveyed would tell someone else

about a bad call-centre experience. More than a third of people had changed suppliers because of it. Hold music and automated routing systems were rated as the single most irritating aspect of customer service.

The good news is that with a bit of planning you can stop torturing your customers. "There is no need to put people on hold at all. It drives them nuts," says Neville Upton, founder of call centre outsourcer The Listening Company. "It tells them that you don't value their call. That's simply bad business."

The easiest solution is to employ a third party to help out, he argues. "Companies that use hold music will give you two reasons why they can't answer immediately: they receive too many calls at once and it takes too long for their agents to deal with each call. Neither excuse is acceptable. If you do a sales promotion or have seasonal swings, then you should use a call-centre service to answer calls for you during those peak periods. Customers won't know that they aren't calling you directly and they will be grateful that they have got straight through to a human."

You can also work to speed up resolution, Upton adds. "Agents should be trained to identify the urgency in the caller's voice: do they want a chat or are they in a rush? Building empathy will lead to higher

satisfaction levels. Agents then need to show they are able to resolve the call first time. Asking customers to call back or try another number is absurd. You've got to deal with their enquiry, so do it first time."

If your company really can't handle the influx of calls, call them back at a time that suits them. "Customers can specify precisely when they would like to be called," Upton says. "This means that there is no hanging around waiting for an agent."

If your customers are regularly kept on hold, you might want to take a close look at how your staff are dealing with calls. Why are they taking so long? A study by Siemens provides a clue. It has found that agents spend only 29 per cent of their time talking to customers. They spend the rest grappling with IT – for example, cutting and pasting information, searching for information and updating databases.

The cause of this inefficiency usually isn't a lack of technology – it is too much. It's common for agents to deal with up to 20 software packages when talking to clients. There's a customer relationship management (CRM) system, scripts, billing software, e-mail, instant messaging, call-routing software, time logging and credit information. Also, when companies merge they often combine their systems, leading to a proliferation of databases. Agents spend vital

minutes switching between applications and inputting the same details more than once.

To solve this you could buy an all-singing and all-dancing replacement. Costly? Definitely. The misers' alternative is to acquire a "faceplate" package that ties together all your current software. The best known of these is Jacada, which is used by O2 and Capita. Jacada looks to the user like an all-inclusive program, but is really a smart interface sitting on top of all the existing software packages, which run as before. Should a customer provide a new address, the agent inputs the data into Jacada, which automatically updates all the other

databases. Because it provides a single interface, there is no need to flick between programs. It streamlines work, too: whenever the agent completes a task in the enquiry sequence, Jacada opens the next input box. Because staff need to learn only one system, training new recruits is a significantly faster process. Best of all, if you upgrade your CRM system or switch billing software, the agents' interface remains identical. No training in your new software will be needed.

If you prefer a more high-tech solution, how about replacing your agents with computers? The age of voice recognition is upon us. At their most basic, voice

recognition systems simply identify callers. Voice prints are as unique as fingerprints. When customers call, a single sentence can be enough to confirm who they are.

Orange is already using voice recognition to identify customers (although it asks for supplementary information as a safeguard). Stu Dorman is a "solution architect" at Orange's supplier, Sabio. "Voice recognition has so many advantages," he says. "For starters, it removes password requests – you can't forget your voice. It is more secure than paper-based processes, as there is no need to ask for sensitive information such as your birthday or mother's maiden name. Identity theft is pretty hard with this system."

Few companies have adopted the technology so far. One of the main obstacles is scepticism among customers about the use of biometric data. But their concerns are being overcome as identity theft becomes more common, according to Dorman. "Everyone knows the failings of paper-based systems. Customers don't mind taking the time to enrol if they know that their accounts will be more secure as a result," he says.

Voice recognition technology has another trick up its sleeve: speech recognition. OK, you can't chat freely with computers yet, but you can issue simple commands.

"Egg Bank is trialling a system that asks customers why they are calling," Dorman explains. "They can say 'I want to check my balance' or 'I am buying a car and need finance', and their call is directed to the right department. It is much faster than hearing a recorded message telling you to press one for loans, two for balance enquiries, three for lost cards and so on."

Soon you won't have to talk to a human at all. "You could ring Orange and say 'I want to put £20 on my mobile phone' and that would be done automatically," Dorman says enthusiastically. "Theoretically this is possible with today's technology. But customers aren't ready for that yet. My guess is that you'll see it in two or three years' time."

A breakthrough? The end of troublesome telephony? Or could talking to machines be the most irritating thing since, well, listening to hold music? It sounds as though we're going to find out.

Charles Orton-Jones, former deputy editor of *Real Business*, is an award-winning freelance journalist.

"And I think it's gonna be a long, long time"

"If you absolutely must put people on hold, don't play them music. Play them a message. Then, while they are waiting, you can sell to them, inform them and educate them."

So says Rob Marsden, who runs Impact on Hold, a company that provides recorded messages for firms such as Manpower, Saab and Virgin Active.

"Music just keeps them waiting. A professionally recorded script can actually be useful to your customers," he says. "It is a chance to tell them about new products, when your opening hours are, awards you've won, special offers, what sets you apart from the competition and what your unique selling point is. You can actually entertain callers, so they don't hang up."

Marsden has research to back up his claim: "More than 80 per cent of callers prefer to hear messages rather than music, retention is increased by 40 per cent, sales increase 20 per cent and you can even get a 15 per cent increase in enquiries."

A four-minute, professionally produced script costs £300 to record.

Should you insist on piping music down your

customers' lug-holes, at least choose the right tunes – and be sure to pay. The MCPS-PRS alliance looks after musicians' interests. It charges £99 a year for up to five phone lines, £200 for up to 45 lines and £3.36 per line for 46 lines or more, irrespective of which artist you use.

David Hargreaves, professor of education at Roehampton University, found that callers hung on 30 seconds longer when listening to pan-pipe covers of Beatles songs rather than the real versions. Men stay on the line longer when listening to Mozart or Chopin, whereas women prefer light jazz. Hard rock irks just about everybody.

Perhaps the way forward has been discovered by TalkTalk. "We have replaced hold music with poetry," explains a spokesman for the telephone company. "Our founder, Charles Dunstone, is a fan of Roger McGough [pictured]. We approached Roger and told him we needed 30-second poems. He produced and recorded a number of poems that were just right."

FM reader Carole King, who alerted the magazine to this development, says: "I called TalkTalk and heard these snappy ditties while I was waiting on hold. I was irritated initially, but did listen. I hate to say that I was captivated."

Perhaps a line or two of doggerel is just the thing:

*Goodbye, Greensleeves
Now the nation seethes
To Rog McGough's verse
Which could be worse*

