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Local and national
Sports
Weather
Traffic
Archives
Opinion
Obituaries
Local stocks

Marketplace

Classifieds
Jobs
Homes
Cars
Yellow Pages

Only online

Top Story
I've Been Thinking
Cort's Buzz
Time Out

Community

Calendar
Photo album
History

Site search:



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Buzz Off - There must be 50 ways to tell a telemarketer to get lost



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By **TRICIA JONES**, Columbian staff writer

There was a lot going on in the weeks leading up to Labor Day, what with vacations winding down, children getting ready to return to school and a last series of cookouts to mark the end of the grilling season.

So it's understandable if you planned to sign up for the national Do Not Call Registry but missed the Sept. 1 deadline, which was extended by a day by the Federal Trade Commission.

And that means that when telemarketers begin consulting their lists of prohibited telephone numbers on Oct. 1, yours will not be on it. Considering the pool of potential customers, minus some 48.4 million households who did meet the deadline, those who remain take on an even more sharply defined profile. Something like the bull's eye at an archery tournament.

But instead of feeling vulnerable, remember what makes the best defense. The question is, how offensive should the good offense be?

It depends on your willingness to inflict discomfort on others.

Telemarketers may well have taken over the No. 1 spot on the people-we-love-to-hate list, surpassing lawyers, used-car salesmen and Martha Stewart.

Even people who don't hate telemarketers admit the timing of their calls is atrocious.

Corinne Gregory, president and founder of The PoliteChild, of Woodinville, has made a career out of teaching good behavior and character through classroom training to young children. Though she deplores departing from the Golden Rule doing unto others as you would wish others would do unto you Gregory admits telemarketers have an unerring ability to interrupt family activities.

"It's like going to a Mexican restaurant and the waiter comes to take your order when you're putting a tortilla chip in your mouth. It's a gift, actually, of calling at inconvenient times," she said.



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Manners are important to Gregory, so she sees no need to retaliate for telemarketers' offenses.

"Even if someone is being rude to you, you don't need to respond in kind. It gains you nothing," she said.

Others are not so charitable. Web sites abound with advice on how to torment telemarketers, with suggestions ranging from blasting a whistle into the phone to staging a mock-murder within the caller's hearing to sobbing that "No, John Smith can't come to the phone because he died last week after being bitten by a rabid opossum."

Some suggest uttering three simple words: "Hold on, please," before setting down the phone and walking away. (You know it's time to go back and hang up your handset when you hear the phone company's beep-beep-beep tone.)

There is a middle way in dealing with telemarketers, one that lacks malice but requires imagination.

According to "Home Wisdom: A Commonsense Guide to Solving Everyday Problems" (Time Life, \$12.95), "it's more fun for everybody if you ... try to come up with an interesting explanation for why you can't possibly avail yourself of the product or service being offered."

The idea, editor Jon Vara writes, is to not put the caller on the spot but to wrap up the call as quickly as possible while allowing both parties to save face.

Phone companies are responding to rage about telemarketer intrusion with caller identification features that help you avoid unwanted calls.

Qwest's "Caller ID with Privacy Plus" responds to unidentified numbers with a distinctive ring. After the ring, a prerecorded message asks callers to identify themselves by name. Once you listen to the recording, you can take the call or not. Find out more at www.qwest.com and clicking on Products & Services.

As well, some answering machines are armed with distinctive tones that you can program to alert you to certain calls. Check out the product brochures.

Here, from a variety of sources including Internet sites and a book or two, is a collection of responses to telemarketers aimed at cooling your temper, and not your waiting dinner.

* "You know, I won't be able to take advantage of that because I'm starting a 10-year sentence for identify theft later this week, and I really shouldn't be making any commitments until I'm released."

* When the telemarketer gives her name, pretend that she's a long-lost friend. "Verna! It can't be! How have you been since we

bunked together at the mental hospital?" Don't let up when the telemarketer protests. "Oh, Verna, you always were the kidder. But tell me, what ever happened to that cheating skunk of a husband you tried to poison?"

* "Gee, I'm sorry, this house has been condemned to make way for a new Wal-Mart, and I really don't know where I'll be living after that. Do you think I could get phone service under a concrete bridge? If so, maybe you can check back with me on Tuesday."

* Insist that it's all a big joke, and you're not falling for it. "Come on, Ed, I know this is you. You're not fooling me. Hey, I've been wondering, how much did you get for that last shipment of you know, 'product?'"

* "Nice of you to offer, but the Veterans Administration has declared me legally dead and all my bank accounts are frozen."

* "Tell the telemarketer that no, Mr. Brown is not available, but if he can answer three easy questions, he can win lots of terrific prizes. Follow up with "Johnny, tell this enterprising young man what he can win!" Using a different voice, answer yourself by intoning, "Bill, this caller could win an all-expenses-paid trip to the Bahamas, a set of American Tourister luggage or a deluxe tin of Altoids!" Hardly taking a breath, switch back to "Bill's" voice and inquire, "For the Altoids, who is buried in Grant's Tomb?"

* Listen carefully as the caller identifies the company for which she works, then use the name in your reply: "Can you believe it! I work for The XYZ Unlimited, too! Well, I don't have to tell you that we can't sell our widgets to other employees!"

* This is an old one, but remains popular with would-be customers. Tell the telemarketer you are busy at the moment and ask for his home phone number so you can call him back. When the telemarketer declines, that's your cue to say "I guess you don't want anyone bothering you at home, right? Well, now you know how I feel."

* When the caller asks how you're doing, respond "I just lowered my cholesterol." Repeat as the answer to each successive question.

* Tell the telemarketer your ankle is tagged for home incarceration and ask if he could bring you a pizza.

* Pick the foreign accent of your choice and use it to say, "Sorry, I'm not very interesting."

* Impersonate a religious zealot and busily set yourself to trying to convert the telephone soliciter to your new religious cult. Be sure the faith somehow involves dingoes and flapjacks.

In the end, the most effective and kindest way to answer a telephone solicitation is to fall back on a polite "No, thank you, and

please add me to your Do Not Call list." Then hang up.

Nobody can make a sale off a dial tone.

Columbian staff writer Angela Allen contributed to this story.

WAIT! DON'T HANG UP -- YET

Tim Searcy, executive director for the American Teleservices Association, asks that we be polite and give a telemarketer 45 seconds to find out if there's any possible interest in what he or she is pitching.

Because no matter how much everyone says they can't stand telephone solicitors, somebody has to be buying something from them.

"The teleservice industry is a \$662 billion industry," said Searcy, whose association advocates for those who generate telephone, Internet, and e-mail sales, services, and support. "But if you ask a consumer, I've never met anyone who will (admit) to making a purchase from an outbound call."

Searcy said outbound calls, those made by a telemarketer, account for 4 percent of all sales in the United States. As for the callers themselves, Searcy said they're just people trying to get by in the world.

About 26 percent of telemarketers are single mothers, 30 percent are from the Welfare to Work or other public assistance program and 5 percent are physically disabled, according to the association.

So have your fun with them if you must, but remember that any anger expressed to a telemarketer shouldn't be directed at him or her personally.

As for the creative type of responses that use outrageous reasons why we can't take up the caller's offer. "It's kinder than hanging up," Searcy said.

Tricia Jones

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