

The Nightmare on Telecom Streetⁱ

H. James Harrington, a noted quality consultant, related the following story in *Quality Digest* magazine:

I called to make a flight reservation just an hour ago. The telephone rang five times before a recorded voice answered. "Thank you for calling ABC Travel Services," it said. "To ensure the highest level of customer service, this call may be recorded for future analysis." Next, I was asked to select from one of the following three choices: "If the trip is related to company business, press 1. Personal business, press 2. Group travel, press 3." I pressed 1.

I was then asked to select from the following four choices: "If this is a trip within the United States, press 1. International, press 2. Scheduled training, press 3. Related to a conference, press 4." Because I was going to Canada, I pressed 2.

Now two minutes into my telephone call, I was instructed to be sure that I had my customer identification card available. A few seconds passed and a very sweet voice came on, saying, "All international operators are busy, but please hold because you are a very important customer." The voice was then replaced by music. About two minutes later, another recorded message said, "Our operators are still busy, but please hold and the first available operator will take care of you." More music. Then yet another message: "Our operators are still busy, but please hold. Your business is important to us." More bad music. Finally the sweet voice returned, stating, "To speed up your service, enter your 19-digit customer service number." I frantically searched for their card, hoping that I could find it before I was cut off. I was lucky; I found it and entered the number in time. The same sweet voice came back to me, saying, "To confirm your customer service number, enter the last four digits of your social security number." I pushed the four numbers on the keypad. The voice said: "Thank you. An operator will be with you shortly. If your call is an emergency, you can call 1-800-CAL-HELP, or push all of the buttons on the telephone at the same time. Otherwise, please hold, as you are a very important customer." This time, in place of music, I heard a commercial about the service that the company provides.

At last, a real person answered the telephone and asked, "Can I help you?" I replied, "Yes, oh yes." He answered, "Please give me your 19-digit customer service number, followed by the last four digits of your social security number so I can verify who you are." (I thought I

gave these numbers in the first place to speed up service. Why do I have to rattle them off again?)

I was now convinced that he would call me Mr. 5523-3675-0714-1313-040. But, to my surprise, he said: “Yes, Mr. Harrington. Where do you want to go and when?” I explained that I wanted to go to Montreal the following Monday morning. He replied: “I only handle domestic reservations. Our international desk has a new telephone number: 1-800-1WE-GOTU. I’ll transfer you.” A few clicks later a message came on, saying: “All of our international operators are busy. Please hold and your call will be answered in the order it was received. Do not hang up or redial, as it will only delay our response to your call. Please continue to hold, as your business is important to us.”

Discussion Questions

1. Summarize the service failures associated with this experience.
2. What might the travel agency do to improve its customers’ service experience?

ⁱ Source: H. James Harrington, “Looking for a Little Service,” Quality Digest, May 2000; <http://www.qualitydigest.com>.