Call Answering Systems: "I'm Calling Youuuu"

(With Pardons to Nelson Eddy*)

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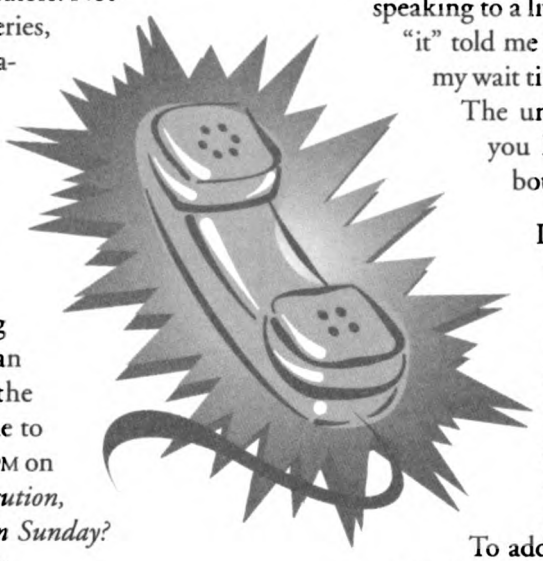
More and more businesses, including archival institutions, have started to utilize recorded call answering systems. Such systems can be great—a positive experience for both the institution or business and the client or customer. Well, as much of a positive experience as dealing with software or trying to straighten out a billing error can be.

It's always important to keep in mind that recorded call answering systems work only if the system is designed well. Personally, I'm still waiting for the techno nerds to produce a working copy of *Star Trek*'s communicators. Not the handheld ones from the original series, but the snazzy ones from later incarnations of the show that were worn like jewelry. Instant communication without any hitches—except for the occasional pesky ion storm or bad plot device. But I digress.



At my last place of employment, we used an old-fashioned answering machine to catch the odd (and I do mean odd) after-hours phone calls. Like the person wondering why there was no one to answer his genealogy questions at 7:30 PM on a Sunday night. *This is a Catholic institution, isn't it? So why isn't someone working on Sunday? A day of rest? That means for me, not you.*

Of course, that was before we purchased a call answering system. It was the only way we could actually get some work done and save someone from spending eight hours explaining how to spell "archives." The script included frequently asked questions: How do I send for my school records? How do I get a copy of my baptismal certificate? How do I obtain an indulgence for skipping Sunday Mass to go play golf? (Just kidding).

And then there are the badly designed call answering systems. A researcher recently contacted me for genealogical information on a deceased member of the religious community I am employed by. When she mentioned that she was having difficulties locating additional materials on the woman's family, I offered to check with other institutions. Rather than name names (I try to avoid libel suits whenever possible), I will refer to a less-than-congenial answering system I encountered as CAS-X. Creative, I know. Since writing brought no positive results and the institution did not have an E-mail address, I decided to try calling. (Yes, not every institution has E-mail, or if they do, they are not prompt about responding to inquiries.) It was a mistake. The recorded call answering system seemed to be designed to prevent me from speaking to a live individual. When I persisted, "it" told me in a distinctly snotty voice that my wait time would be at least 30 minutes. The unspoken comment was, "Don't you have better things to do than bother us?"

I admit there have been times when my lapses into phone rage have exceeded my episodes of road rage. And believe me, that's saying something. When I finally, by accident I'm sure, got a chance to speak to a living, breathing individual, my pleasant disposition had evaporated. To add insult to injury, the clerk kept complaining I wasn't talking loud enough. "Can you hear me now?" I asked as I flushed the cell phone down the toilet. Ah ... instant gratification. But that's a topic for another article.

*If you don't know who Nelson Eddy is, you need to spend time watching American Movie Classics. What do you do with your Saturdays anyway? Organize your closets by season? Oh, wait ... I do that.