

Reach out and block someone

By Eve Glicksman

It was telephone gamesmanship of the highest order. She hung up rather than leave a message on his machine that he might not return. But after hearing several hang-ups—he was there all along—he pressed #69, which connects you to the last caller.

She said hello and he promptly hung up, recognizing the voice of his old flame. Suspecting it was him, she now pressed #69. A "little old lady" answered, and she hung up, thoroughly confused.

Moments later—I swear I'm not making this up—her phone rang. It was him, proclaiming victory. Yes, he does a great old lady imitation, and no, he didn't want to talk to her.

Ready for round two? Well, consider that either could have been snuffed out much sooner had their opponent subscribed to Caller ID, the phone company's newest optional service which enables you to see the phone number of the caller before you pick up . . . or don't.

These gimmicks offer new ways to devalue communication.

I'm chastised when my line has been busy, as if I'm supposed to apologize for not having Call Waiting (reach out and snub someone), the most popular add-on. I should pay extra every month for the privilege of someone being able to interrupt my conversations? Then there's the backward etiquette that requires I offer to step aside when their Call Waiting tolls.

In another value-added indignity, I once was tone blocked. Here, calls from a designated phone number, or simply the last person who called in my case, aren't put through. I didn't want to leave my number on a stranger's phone machine and he wouldn't answer unscreened calls or tolerate hang-ups. Anyone who needs that much power and control over human contact is best avoided.

Tell me there isn't something just as obnoxious about people who announce they are calling from a car. Am I supposed to speak in a more reverential tone or feel particularly grateful for getting half their attention? I certainly don't feel a need to tell my friend who has a rotary phone that I'm calling from a push button. Or try having a conversation with someone on a cordless or speaker phone who is chasing kids around the house or is all too obviously in the bathroom.

The pager has become another must-have status accessory. A beeper that goes off in high visibility situations is an ideal way to advertise one's desirability and importance. So what if it's only your spouse reminding you to pick up milk on the way home?

On to the nightmare of what has been dubbed the voice processing industry. Here we have automated call handling, the so-called electronic receptionist—press one if you're a moron, press two if you're an idiot . . . You can go through four levels of pressing and still not get what you called for. And what the heck is the pound sign besides what you want to do to the phone after getting lost in menuland with no way back to an operator? Henry David Thoreau called these kinds of inventions improved means to an unimproved end.

Even answering machines can backfire. Today, phone tag is part of the vernacular. Most despicable are people who call at a time when they know you are out. They don't want to talk to you for reasons that are usually obvious, but want the record clear that they checked in, returned your call or relayed the bad tidings. These messages invariably include phrases such as "hope all is well" or "I'm really sorry, but . . ."

There is a silver lining, however, for those who dislike the beep-then-speak method. One telecommunications manufacturer defends the system by saying it is preferable to talk to a machine rather than to someone who might not get the message right. Now that's a forward-thinking attitude I never considered.

In the end, all this phony baloney has a hollow ring. Now I can fax a report to someone in seconds, but it still sits on his desk for three weeks. I can leave a message on voice mail, but I'll probably get a quicker response if I hang up and try again later. Sure, I could carry a cellular phone with me, but is the annoyance and cost commensurate with the need?

As Ogden Nash once said, progress might have been all right once, but it has gone on for far too long.

If you agree, press one . . .

Eve Glicksman is a free-lance writer in Philadelphia.

Clipped By:



evewrites

Mon, Jan 22, 2018