How to deal with Call Handlers

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In these hi tech days of customer relations deployed through the medium of the call centre, we find that the bureaucrats have advanced their manipulative methods in line with the advancement of the systems they support.

Social Engineering *Community* *Commercial* *Mind Control* *Confidence Trick*

For the purposes of this article we will focus on two general areas of support.
1. Mobile Phone Network (GSM) 2. Internet Service Provider (ADSL). These companies usually farm out their telecom support to a company

specialising in call centre management. It must be made clear that the individual dealing with your enquiry is unlikely to have any hands on
knowledge of the product. These firms are not engineers, their employer is a merely a front end and may also handle completely separate clients from one contract to the next.

So, Expect such flagrant displays of sheer ignorance as;

> No, that's not how it works sir, with ADSL you don't really get any upload, you only get download

Clearly, this man should have stuck in at school and pursued a career working for the roads dept. turning a Stop-Go sign. Now in defence of these telecom support call centres, they only exist, because it works out much cheaper for the Telco or the ISP or the mobile phone network to pay a complete fee for their support provision, rather than training their own staff and being obliged to fork out the rates necessary to retain IT professionals on a purely troubleshooting basis.

> Why does IT support cost so much ?

Because in a world of the Windows powered PC, Java powered Handset or god forbid, the Internet powered Fridge, the number of variables and factors creating your support issue, are immediately incalculable and in real terms may require an OS overhaul or any number of seemingly irrelevant upgrades / repairs. (It's not an exact science after all..)

With this background in mind, consider another piece of information which will go some way to assist in your imminent conflict with these often incompetent bureaucrats ;

The individual dealing with your support enquiry really couldn't care less, and furthermore is unlikely to fear any reprisal due to any incorrect
information they may have given you.

(This is where it gets interesting)

We've all heard the automated switchboard telling us that "calls may be recorded for training purposes", consider the psychological implications of this trend. As time goes on, millions of customers develop a subordinate manner whilst going through the relentless mechanism of getting some assistance with a service they pay a not insignificant sum for.

So reverse the trend and upset the apple cart.

In a nutshell, take the offensive as soon as you are shunted from the automatic switchboard onto a line with an actual human.

A usual opener from the call handler would be;

> Good afternoon, UkWAN-K Limited, Pamela speaking. Can I have your account number please?

This would seem pleasant enough to the eye, and indeed the ear. However, it uses a mechanism employed to immediately define the rolls of communication adopted by both parties. It's a textbook conflict management technique designed to make the call handler appear "Assertive". Not aggressive and not passive, but "Assertive" - frankly it's rubbish. It, as with most HR conflict theory, relies on the lowest common denominator, namely, easily lead people that would undoubtedly make good hypnosis subjects.

How does one avoid being pigeonholed as a low brow sheep ?

Again, the offense is all important, a suitable response would be ;

> Never mind that just now, I am legally required to inform you that I am recording this call, my account number is DD748Ux etc.

Editors Update: Any legal requirement is specifically in relation to monetisation of any recordings made. Consequently, the thinking of this author has changed. Better to use an opening gambit of : "**Thank you, before we continue can you please confirm that the time and date on your system is etc etc**". This fulfills two individual requirements. Firstly it makes any possible 'data cleaning' much harder because you have introduced a timestamp to the recording which hinders potential editing of the file. Secondly it informs the call handler that the caller is not simply another unwitting member of the public and could actually be seeking to implicate them in some form of compliance inquisition. This method may seem like overkill in terms of strategy and conflict management, however it will instantly shift the balance of power in favour of the caller. The call handler becomes much less confident as a result of any possible compliance issues. This means that they will be far less audacious in their attempts to manipulate the caller. This then leaves the door open for the caller (customer) to direct the conversation and obtain the support they rightfully deserve.

There are various incarnations of this rejoinder, however you don't really want to use any language too legally specific, don't be hitting out with phrases like "*Tort*" or "*Contracta Illigitemi*", as this will at best create contempt, or at worst seem alarmist enough to inspire them into dumping the call immediately. Instead, use language clearly understood by someone who probably didn't spend a lot of time in higher education. The tone of voice is perhaps the most critical factor in this exchange, to appear nervous is the worst case possible scenario. It will either unsettle the call handler, thereby increasing the chances of them dumping your call, or it will once again place control of the dialogue in their hands, and empower them with the dominant tonal frequencies or '*power hum*'.

Assuming you have developed some form of authoritarian quality to your vocal skills, attempt to project the impression that you record calls every day as part of your job, that you may in fact be an investigative journalist, or better yet an internal HR mole on a zealous witch hunt.
It is worth noting, that in most cases, you are entitled to approach the firm which employs the call handler, and ask for a transcript of your
conversation. If this is the case, it doesn't hurt to mention it in line with your opening disclaimer. Sad though it may be, you usually need to scare call centre staff into doing their utmost to resolve your support issue.

Should you be shunted onto hold, transferred or generally snubbed. Don't hesitate in hanging up, redialling and injecting slightly more venom into your legal disclaimer. Should your call in fact be picked up by the relevant dept. you must re-iterate the disclaimer. Basically everyone in the UK has some small legal right to offer tacit approval regarding the recording of their telephone conversations. Should you not make them aware of it at the beginning, a playback or transcript may not be admissible in an enquiry, investigation, or general complaint procedure.

With practice, you will be able to analyse the skill of your call handler within the first couple of sentences. It then becomes a case of identifying the weak points in their semi scripted gambits. Hesitation is your weak point, should you trail off with;

> uhmmm - ermm, well....

You will find the call handler leaping in to cut you short and re-direct the flow of conversation in their favour.
They may not be super intelligent life forms, but they most certainly will have handled thousands of calls dealing with the same issues. Anyone will find themselves developing strategic or indeed predatory communication skills should they be subjected to an environment of endless and identical conversations. They may not actually be aware of it, but on some mental level, callhandlers have accepted their corporate indoctrination and become mercenary exponents of spin, or as they say in technical circles "Sharks".

These sharks very rarely have to deal with anything bigger than a penguin, so get your strategy of multiple tentacles correct, and watch a confident Tiger shark become rather placid when faced with a prepared and irritated Arcetuthos (the giant squid).

Make no mistake, these days the industry is awash with complacency. As such it is your responsibility as a consumer to vociferously demand adequate support.

"Communication without Intelligence is noise, Intelligence without Communication is irrelevant" General Alfred M. Gray - Us Marine Corps