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## My cries for help reach unsympathetic electronic ears

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By Kathy Hedberg of the Tribune



### Up Front/Commentary

Sometimes I think the reason some companies have switched to electronic telephone operators instead of real humans is because of people like me who have been rude to real humans in the past.

I am ashamed of the times I called somebody up, trying to find out about my insurance policy or why I couldn't get my digital recorder to work. Sometimes the person at the other end of the phone seemed unable to comprehend the question - of course, I'm not always as articulate as I could be when I'm yelling hysterically.

And, worse, the more I yelled the more disinterested the operator became. Really, what the heck does some guy in Bangalore care about whether or not I can program the clock on my coffee maker? I can scream all I want but he can check out mentally and nobody gets anywhere.

Eventually companies decided they didn't need to put up with blockheads like me, so they replaced the real human operators with electronic voices who care even less than the humans did if you have a problem.

One thing about electronic operators, though, is they are unflinchingly polite no matter how rude you get. There's nothing you can do to hurt their feelings, which means your many tools of manipulation that you use to get your kids and other people to do stuff you want, don't work.

I called up an airline a few days ago trying to find out something about transferring free air miles from one company to another and I got connected with an electronic operator who sounded like Glenda the Good Witch of the North.

"Remember, at any time you can ask for help by saying, 'Help,' " said Glenda after giving me a long menu of available choices, none of which seemed to suit my purposes.

"Help," I said.

"OK," said Glenda. "Now tell me if you want help with reservations, to book a flight or to apply for our credit card, which would make you eligible to win a free trip to Peru."

"None of the above," I said. At this point my voice was beginning to crack, the way it always does when I'm on the verge of an emotional blow-up.

"I did not understand that selection," said Glenda. "Do you want help with reservations, to book a flight or to apply for our credit card with a low, low interest rate of 42 percent and which would make you eligible for a trip to Devil's Island?"

"Look, lady," I said. "Are you deaf? Did you get this job because you couldn't make it as an automatic door opener? Just give me an intelligent person I can talk to about these air miles."

"I did not understand that selection," said Glenda.

"HELP," I yelled.

"OK. Now tell me if you want help with reservations, to book a flight or ..."

I slammed down the phone. I would probably have called the president of the company to complain, but he, too, is insulated behind a web of sadistic electronic operators whose job it is to drive you crazy until you sign up for their credit card.

And the sad part is, I have no one but myself to blame.

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