Over the last few weeks, my wife and I have noticed about half-a-dozen phone calls at various times of day that had no identification and simply went dead after a few seconds.

Shortly before writing this article in June 2007, I dialed *69 to find out the number of the latest hang-up call and called it. To my astonishment, it was my own phone company, Verizon!

I explained the situation to the pleasant young lady on the line and she explained that the calls were part of a marketing campaign. She offered to put me on Verizon’s do-not-call list. I said that was not the point: it seemed to me that there was something wrong with their auto-dialer programming, so the solution was to fix the problem rather than patch one complainant’s number at a time. She repeated the same explanation and I repeated my objection more slowly. Finally she switched to a different tack that was more informative.

The system does indeed call customers automatically. However, if no one on the Verizon staff is free to respond to the victim – er, excuse me, customer – on the line within three seconds, the system automatically hangs up. This is apparently a design feature.

I went to the US Federal Communications Commission (FCC) Web site and found a little one-page announcement entitled, “Predictive Dialing: Silence on the Other End of the Line.” The consumer alert provides the following information:

> The Federal Communications Commission (FCC) receives complaints about “dead air” or hang up calls. Here’s what happens: the phone rings and when the person receiving the call picks up the phone, he or she is met with silence or the “click” of the calling party disconnecting the call. This can be caused by predictive dialing, a technology that allows a telemarketer to simultaneously dial many more numbers than the telemarketer can handle if all of the called parties pick up at the same time. The first to pick up is connected to the telemarketer while the rest are disconnected.

The practice of predictive dialing, and the resulting abandoned calls, often do not allow you to identify the company calling and, therefore, do not afford you the opportunity to make a ”do-not-call” request under FCC rules.

In 2003, the FCC adopted rules that prohibit telemarketers from abandoning more than three percent of all calls placed by the telemarketer and answered by a person. A call will be considered “abandoned” if it is not transferred to a live sales agent within two seconds of the recipient’s greeting. If you wish to avoid telemarketing calls, you may want to register your number with the National Do-Not-Call Registry by calling 1-888-382-1222 (1-866-290-4236 (TTY)) from the telephone number you wish to register, or you can register on line at www.donotcall.gov. You may also want to contact your state to find out if it has a broad “do-not-call” law that restricts telemarketing calls to individuals registered on its state list.
Going beyond FCC rules, I think it is unacceptable for a company to hang up without identifying itself on an automated marketing call. The victim of such a hang up may not realize that *69 can identify the caller – and some hang-up calls I have received have the originating number blocked against identification. The victim is thus impeded in responding to what can become repeated interruptions of no benefit to the recipient. Without identification of the caller, there is little or no pressure on the perpetrators to stop their abusive practice.

You might want to write to the FCC with your opinion of their ruling _allowing_ 3% of predictive dialing calls to be abandoned and suggest that all automated marketing calls be required to identify the caller and explicitly provide a mechanism for opting out of such calls. “Press 1 to opt out of all future automated marketing calls from Verizon” would be an excellent substitute for the rudeness of a silently terminated anonymous call.

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