Telemarketing and the Disembodied Voice

Kim Sawchuk

The phone rings, a voice speaks: Hello... Hello... Allo. Greek for the other. Within seconds a decision is made. How to approach this mark, my target; this other who is far away, then dialled into existence, whose submission to my proposition is desired so that I might reach my quota.

Listen to the first tones, the undulations of the voice to hear how this other (to) presents herself. Appeal to the familiar, to our narcissism, to our desire for identification. Imitate that other voice. Reflect it. Give back to your mark what is given to you in the first ten seconds of your encounter. Transform this business call, this formal call, into an erotic scene: a scene of seduction. The voice must be clear, preferably low, throaty, yet emphatic. Not too fast: keep the listener in suspense. The use of the pause is fundamental. Give the other a chance to punctuate your pitch with yes, never take an immediate no for an answer.

Your manual, Successful Telemarketing, tells you: "When role-playing session training is completed, consumer representatives are capable of identifying caller personalities and formulating a few seconds of conversation..." Your manual, Successful Telemarketing, has divided the world into seven basic caller personalities. For each basic caller personality, your manual has created seven corresponding response personalities: (1) The direct and natural coupled with the efficient, confident and pleasantly professional; (2) The pleasant and outgoing, to be met by the equally pleasant; (3) The insecure and anxious, who should be consoled by the nurturing parent who will reassure and generate a sense of wellbeing; (4) The confused and uncertain, paired with patient, caring and clarifying; (5) Emergency/panic who should be encountered with an equal sense of urgency; (6) Finally, the sceptical-cynic who can be overcome only by a reassuring knowledgeable response personality conveying professional expertise. (p. 29)

**Diagnostitian and therapist.**

Your power: the ability to evoke a high degree of empathy while controlling the conversation in a polite and positive way. We are the new breed of consumer therapists, and like any therapist we rely on transference in speech to gain the trust of our patients. To successfully cure our ailing consumer patients we must get them to tell their stories, confide in us. Venting their dissatisfaction gives them the illusion that their individual problems can and will be solved over the phone. You help them regain the illusion that they are more than simply a basic call personality; that they are individual subjects who have ultimate influence and control over their consumption. They regain confidence in themselves and the product through their relationship with you.
It is a complex game that works because it is fun to play. It is basic to the nature of our minds. It is a game that we all play, regardless of our age or circumstances. It is a game that we all understand, and we all enjoy playing it.

It is this scene of the seduction of the consumer/patient by the voice of the customer service representative/therapist that the telemarketing industry attempts to efface. Yet like the psychoanalytic situation, it can never completely hide what it tries to repress; that is, the sexual connection, the desire, the love that is aroused. As Freud admitted:

We force the patient to abandon his resistances through love for his. Our treatments are treatments through love. There remains for us only the task of eliminating personal resistances (to transpose, we can turn to the extent that transference exists. (p. 93, "O")

While we call on this abandonment, our complicity is never confessed. We rely on the openness and the emotions of our voices to sell, yet we attempt to disguise the seduction involved in the marketing of these commodities. In a move to legitimate and professionalize the field and disguise these seductions, the industry itself has adopted a quasi-science of neologism, the telemarketer, to replace the old term, telephone solicitor.

Telemarketing today.

The development of consumer data bases which measure demographics and lifestyles is transforming the industry from its low-tech, anyone-can-dial past of smoke filled rooms where the marginally employed sell magazine packages and season's tickets to the opera and ballet, to new heights of technical achievement. The industry describes itself in this way:

Telemarketing comprises the integrat ed and systematic application of telecommunications and information processing technologies with management systems to optimize the marketing communications mix used by the company to reach its customers. It retains personalised customer interaction while simultaneously attempting to better meet customer needs and improve cost effectiveness. (Successful Telemarketing)

In less technical jargon, the telemarketing industry sees itself as a new marketing discipline that uses telecommunications technology with a systematically organized marketing program. It features the use of personal selling with minimal face-to-face contact. While proponents of telemarketing admit that a door-to-door sales force may be preferable in some instances, the sheer volume of calls that can be made and the cost-effectiveness of these calls has justified its increased use in business: it is the quintessential growth industry.

Its scope?

Toll free 800 lets you buy products from the TV in your home. For a nominal fee, 500 numbers give you a romance on the phone, or buy your participation into the new consumer democracy by letting you vote for the movie of an evening or a favorite song. The WATTTS line, which facilitates the distribution of products from Hallmark, the social expression company, to Gulf Oil across vast distances, is used because it allows businesses to make any number of calls at a fixed rate. Customer communications integrated with total marketing systems. Total marketing systems which can be combined with other visual mediums, entering every aspect of life behind the facade of benevolence and dialogue, blurring the distinction between the inside and the outside, the public and the private, calling into question yet reaffirming the sacred domain of the home and the ideology of the nuclear family.

Paradigm of this collapse and this paradox is General Electric's "pioneering" use of telemarketing. The GE Answer Centre, Architecturally, the Answer Centre is built as a simulation of a home - the domestic scene in which their products are found. On every product is a toll-free 1-800 number which puts you, the consumer, into direct and immediate contact with around the clock customer service representatives and technical experts who can solve all your appliance problems.

At the head of the GE Answer Centre: Powell Taylor. He is daddy, his employees make him family. He is the perfect father.

Hindernome in a masculine way. Impossibly grown, an authority figure. Stood in wisdom and GE experience. Respected, but not feared. Powell Taylor looks out with an iron fist but with gentle relays. He gives authority to each consumer contact; he counsels them as necessary. Powell Taylor is the head of a mature family in every way. (p. 32, 37)

The author of our text adds that if the phone were to choose someone to play Powell Taylor it would be Lorne Greene (Ben Cartwright).

His children?

Powell Taylor does not lead an army of robots, but a team, a family of carefully selected and carefully trained, caring individuals. They celebrate holidays, share complimentary letters. The family spirit carries right to the work station, they proudly proclaim.

Powell Taylor pointed to the people of Disney World - young, clean cut, spunkily clean, outgoing - as the model the company decided to follow in building the GE Centre staff. (Successful Telemarketing)

Their slogan is GE is ME; the illusion of their own individuality, their identity as human projects once again recreated in the most crass of corporate philosophies. It is the perfect merger between the particular and a universal corporate will.

Loss of memory, apathy.

Populations grow resemble an illness. A happy family that doesn't exist anymore; a social space that doesn't exist anymore; are witnessing the social spaces and the need for more social spaces; the need for more social spaces. The need for more social spaces is a history of technologies of the architec
tics to architectures and telemarketing.

It says, power which is effectively ubiquitous and when most fr
A political economy of penetration, or violation.

In Canada, telemarketing is still a relatively small and undeveloped practice, appearing in The Canadian Business Abstracts only in 1977, and then under the cumbersome term "telephone marketing". However, in the United States, telemarketing centres do not simply provide customer services, but assist in the penetration, reproduction and maintenance of markets within markets. With the elimination of face-to-face contact, the movement and dependence on actual bodies decreases costs, allowing for the speedy exploration of new consumer territories. It is a new form of imperialism, social imperialism, which does not expand outward to uncertain, risky terrain, but penetrates inward to conquer already existing potential markets within technologically sophisticated industrialised nations.

Capitalism's implosion; that is, the overlapping of a therapeutic discourse, with the corporate scene, the ideology of the family, and our own domestic, regional space.

And with this collapse, its most cherished rhetoric, the rhetoric of equality and participation, is sacrificed, stripped. Its admission: "not all customers are treated equal". That is, as a general marketing rule, 20% of all one's customers supply 80% of one's business. (p. 103, ST). The challenge? Not only to find new customers, but to deepen the desires of that dormant 80% of your already existing customers. How do smart marketers know who their potential customers are within this 80%?

They know by developing customer profiles; and they follow this second principle: our best prospects are those with profiles that are the same or similar to those of our best customers.

These sections of the consumer populace can then be targeted with the appropriate product.

A triple need.

First, to rationalise an inefficient exchange that was no longer effective for corporations. Second, the need to develop the corresponding consumer data bases to determine where future markets might be and what products could be manufactured. Third, and perhaps most importantly, the need to pacify and appeal to today's sceptical, cynical consumer because "bigness and remoteness have melted down one on one communication" (p. 51, ST). We will return to this point.

Telemarketing is also an integral part of capitalism's attempt to cope with dramatic social changes which have affected the business environment: new lifestyles, such as an increase in single family households; an increase in the number of women in the work-force (women who in the past had more time to devote to consumption outside of the home because of their confinement within it); shortages of capital; higher interest rates, etc.

These are reasons that the industry gives to legitimise and sell telemarketing to other businesses. But as well, there is the need for more flexibility and direct marketing techniques appropriate to today's nomadic and rapidly changing population; techniques that overcome distance, space, remoteness, linking home and business by the electrical nerve impulses of the telephone wire. The telemarketing industry has managed to complete the languages of modern business/public administration, with the techniques of behavioural psychology, computer science, and perhaps unconsciously, psychotherapy.

Finally, telemarketing is employed to fulfill marketing requirements, and to give capitalism some good press, by improving the tarnished image of business as faceless, uncaring, impersonal and bureaucratic.
equally cynical as a policy named at do not share an al.
the product, to the con.
Up to the region, know.
As you read a clearly worded.
the region, this.
the region named: your schizophrenic.

A new language is coded.
A new language is coded.

The trick?

To create the image of personality warmth and caring without appearing to seduce the consumer or create a sense of personal contact, the telecommunication industry and the ideology of supply and demand economics. To give you, the consumer, the appearance of direct control, the telephone, telemarketing, makes present an absence of intimacy through the immediacy of the sound of the voice. It is a system of phonetic writing, that in its most sophisticated form "fulfills the thirst for personal attention and solves the cost problem as well." As Successful Telemarketing promises:

with documented case histories, you will learn how even a far away, faceless corporation can be given a friendly face. A heart. A soul. A voice.

The telephone's domestic appearance erases its complexity in the development of market spaces in our century. The telephone, and now the computer, allows transactions to be conducted with speed, speed which is integral to productivity. Telephones have even shaped the architecture of cities: we would not have skyscrapers without telephones, for the telephone not only made possible the colonization of horizons but brought sell-out in the modern consumer society, the corporate form, movement up and down buildings possible. In spite of this collision, the telephone maintains an image of benevolence. This benevolence stems less from its origins as Alexander Graham Bell's "pleasure instrument," but rather from its uses as a tool for controlling the consumer, as a tool for selling, as a tool for manipulation. It is a paradoxical one within the Canadian context. As Arthur Kroeker writes:

"Technology is both centre and margin in Canada - centre (metropolitan domination) and margins (technological dependency as the locus of Canadian identity) in the Canadian imagination." (p. 101, IMG)

While it is clear that telemarketing is an operation emaning from the centre of finance capital in Canada, its legitimation and our metropolitan domination is disguised because of the dislocation of speech from the body.

Hindered only by time zones, the voice moves from the east coast to the west coast in the course of an evening. Within the space of five hours, the successful Canadian telemarketer travels across the country oblivious to boundaries and geographical impediments.

As woman you are uncomfortably aware that you occupy these double divisive positions. You find yourself playing traditional feminine roles: solicitive, sexy, nurturing. You sell, you defend products that you know have little relation to those lives you are urging your clients to create. You are paid a quota you guile desperately. You sell out your gender by promoting the image of sports illustrated as you betray other women through your complicity with phallocentric ideology. Finally, you partake in the penetration of Canada by American consumerism.

Yet, this woman is your consumer, and you are their agent, on the phone to sell them goods.

The successful Canadian telemarketer adapts herself, erases her own subjectivity, history, and fiction when using the phone, adopting different accents, styles, and inflections in different regions; subjects themselves reborn on a computer card at the moment of their death as a subscriber to your product. The successful Canadian telemarketer, pioneer, wins customers. You need not be a squeaky clean youth, like our southern counterparts. In our domestic scene it is less important to manipulate the basic caller personality, than to place this imaginary body, this voice within the nexus of reg.

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What do you think you can see in a picture like this.
And a couple of it's names is clear. They appear to reach the same, but they're not. They're not the same. They're not the same, but they're not. They're not the same. They're not the same. They're not the same. They're not the same. They're not the same. They're not the same. They're not the same. They're not the same. They're not the same.

Our domestic space.

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equally cynical as you realize the duplicity involved in all these levels. You do not share an allegiance to the product, to the company. You use pseudonyms appropriate to the product, the region, knowing they cannot call back. As you read your script which is a carefully worked out set of coded responses to possible consumer objections, these lines become internalized; your schizophrenia, your hysteria increases with each call.

A new language is born, a series of coded idioms, neologisms to speed up your dialing. You employ the language of drugs to soothe your nerves, to calm your f serene. You are addicted to the possibility of a single sale, a single connection as the night wears on and you are no closer to your quota: c.c.'s, completed calls: n.a., not at home; n.i., not interested; d.a., didn't answer; d.a., dead answer; d.a., dead on answering. Your shock when your sense of sympathy is revealed by the answer of the other that your target cannot renew his subscription because he is poor. A smooth operator, your efficient, confident, cheerful, pleasant professional voice, as you quickly try to recall your basic caller personalities, as you flip through your script. You are embarrassed at the sound of the bereaved, you are embarrassed for her emotion, and by the overwrought intimacy that you are sharing with this stranger on a computer card. You need your quota. You hastily apologize, no sale possible, you hang up. Disconnect, before this encounter affects your ability to make future calls; and deny this moment of countertransference, for it may affect future performances.

It is the anonymity provided by the phone that allows you to make all of these connections in one evening, and which, to some extent, overcomes some of the initial prejudices that accompany the sight of differences in the body. Telemarketing is a contemporary instance of the interplay between speech and writing, and of our belief in the presence and precision of speech and verbal communication, and in the indeterminacy of the post and the written word. The phone gives you three to five minutes of the undivided attention of the other which you must use expeditiously: make your sale, disguise your intention, for telemarketing - aural sex - is capitalism's ultimate talking cure.

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Selected Bibliography


