

# Telemarketing and the Disembodied Voice

Kim Sawchuk

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

Listen to the first tones, undulations of the voice to hear how this other (re) 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 a few seconds into the 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 well-being; (4) The confused and uncertain, paired with patient, caring and clarifying; (6) Emergency/panic who should be encountered with an equal sense of urgency; (7) Finally, the sceptical cynic who can be overcome only by a reassuring knowledgeable response personality conveying professional expertise. (p. 29)

## Diagnostician and therapist.

Your power: the ability to exude 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.



*Uh--this isn't something I would usually do.*

Visuals from the project and bookwork  
nO fiXeD aDdrESs  
by Joey Morgan

It is a complex game that works because it goes beyond identifying basic caller personalities. Your effacement allows you to engage in the creation of fantasies, perhaps to stand in for mother, father, sister, brother. A recreation of first love, desire for the (m)-other's voice, incestuous desire; a desire that is ultimately short-circuited. Cut off. Disconnected. To maintain your control over this speech situation, to sell the product, counter-transference, your desires, your sympathies, your fears, must be denied.

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 us. Our treatments are treatments through love. There remains for us only the task of eliminating personal resistances (to transference). We can cure to the extent that transference exists. (p. 93, "U")*

While we call on this abandonment, our complicity is never confessed. We rely on the power and the eroticism 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 professionalise the field and disguise these seductions, the industry itself has adopted a quasi-scientific 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 integrated 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 personalized 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 T.V. in your home. For a nominal fee, 900 numbers give you a romance or joke, or buy your participation into the new consumer democracy by letting you vote for the movie of an evening or a favorite song. The WATTS line, which facilitates the distribution of products from Hallmark, the social expression company, to Gulf Oil across vast distances, is used because it allows business 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.

Paradigmatic 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 his family. He is the perfect father.

*Handsome in a masculine way. Immaculately groomed, an authority figure. Steeped in wisdom and GE experience. Respected, but not feared. Powell Taylor leads not with an iron fist but with gentle reins. He gives authority to each consumer consultant; he counsels them as necessary. Powell Taylor is the head of a mature family in every way. (p. 22, ST)*

The author of our text adds that if he 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 birthdays, 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, squeaky clean, outgoing - as the model the company decided to follow in building the GE Centre staff. (Successful Telemarketing)*

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

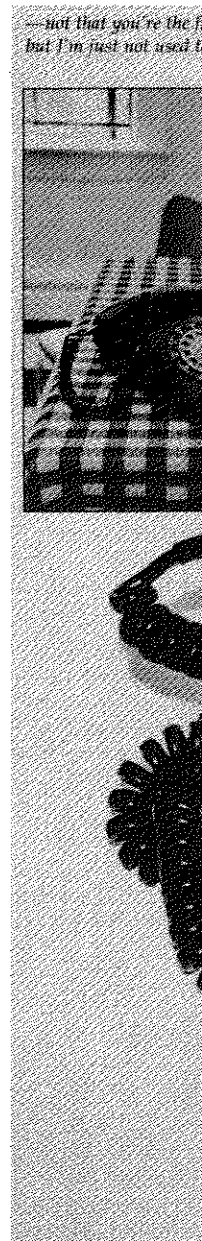


*What do you think you can see in a photo like that - and a couple of notes: a name, a date. They all seem so much the same. You know I could tell you something real. But I can't tell you here, and I can't tell you right now. You'll have to call me. I'm at (416) 979-7493.*

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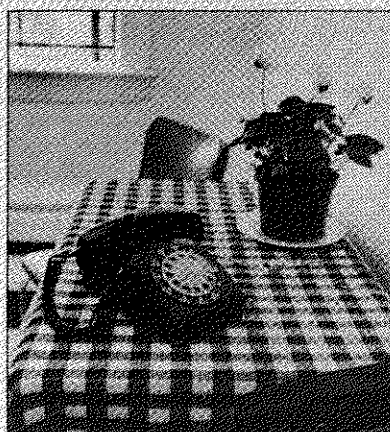


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but I'm just not used to doing this kind of thing.



**A political economy of penetration, of 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

know who their potential customers are within this 80%?

*They know by developing customer profiles: and they follow this sound 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 populus can then be targeted with the appropriate product.

**A triple need.**

First, to rationalize an inefficient exchange that was not cost 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. xi, ST). We will return to this point.

Telemarketing is also an integral part of capital'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 workforce (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 combine 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.



*I was getting kind of anxious.*

*I guess I don't always feel in control.*

GE: the perfect multinational corporation in the era of Reagan's America, where business looks to Disney World for its models of future recruits.

Loss of memory, loss of speech, cultural aphasia.

Populations groom themselves to resemble an (un)-reality which itself represents an image of the past, a happy family that never was, a present that doesn't exist, and a terrifying future motored by these illusions. We are witnessing the creation of new social spaces and new social subjects to fit into these social spaces. There is a need for more detailed critical analysis of the politics of these spaces, which are a history of the operation of micro-technologies of power. From geo-politics to architecture, design, fashion, and telemarketing, it is, as Foucault says, a power which functions most effectively when most banal, most ubiquitously and most insidiously when most friendly and caring.

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 into uncertain, risky terrain, but penetrates inwards to conquer already existing potential markets within technologically sophisticated industrialised nations.

Capital'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 created equal"; that is, as a general marketing rule, 20% of all one's customers supply 80% of one's business (p. 101, 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



### The trick?

To create the image of personality warmth and caring without appearing to seduce the consumer or create needs, for this would conflict with 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 complicity in the development of market spaces in our century. The telephone, and now the computer, allow 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 horizontal space, but made vertical movements possible. In spite of this collusion, the telephone maintains an image of benevolence. This benevolence stems less from its origins as Alexander Graham Bell's "pleasure instrument," Canada, a country where transportation and information are federal industries, we have a provincial rather than a national telephone system.

### Our domestic space.

Like other technologies, the use of the phone and the voice to overcome the problem of distance and space is a paradoxical one within the Canadian context. As Arthur Kroker writes:

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

While it is clear that telemarketing is an operation emanating from the centre of finance capital in Canada, its logocentrism 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.

The successful Canadian telemarketer adapts herself, erases her own subjectivity and history, becomes a phony when using the phone, adopting different accents, styles, and inflections to appeal to faceless names 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, voyageur, 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 region/product/personality.

My telemarketing employer contracted its services out to large American multinational corporations to help them "do business" in Canada - the section I worked for, renewed magazine subscriptions; so, for example, while selling *Country Guide* magazine, a magazine for farmers with only regional appeal, one was given explicit directions for matching the voice to the product: wait for the phone to ring longer than usual, talk slowly, be friendly and more personal. Or when selling *Sports Illustrated*, assumed to have "universal appeal," at least for one sex, it was advisable to change your name to a sportier model, perhaps Ricki, or Vicki. Sound like you play volleyball on the weekends, and do aerobics in the evening; help them to fill in the blank spaces with their imaginary image of your body. Your cardinal rule: match voice to product, and never admit that you are a telemarketer - you do not work for a big impersonal telemarketing firm, but you are a representative for *Time* magazine, the *Financial Post*, or *Country Guide*; and never admit that you are calling from Toronto when phoning outside of Toronto, unless they can be intimidated or suitably impressed. It is a curious and painful dynamic between technology and culture, economy and landscape, one whose frictions leave their scars on your body, caught as you are between these tensions.

You are left with the contradictions of your job, as Canadian, as gendered Canadian subject. While you may hide your race, your ethnicity, appear to move out of your social class, perhaps by feigning a British accent which still carries weight in this country, the timbre of your voice makes it very difficult to disguise your gender. You will be identified and reinscribed as woman, marginally employed, underpaid in banks, in restaurants, in childcare centres, in telemarketing: manifold displacements upon displacements.

As woman you are uncomfortably aware that you occupy these doubly duplicitous positions. You find yourself playing traditional feminine roles: solicitous, sexy, nurturing ear. You sell, you defend products that you know have little relation to those lives you connect with; yet to sell and make your quota you feign sincerity. You sell-out your gender by promoting the swimsuit issue of *Sports Illustrated*; you betray other women through your complicity with phallogocentric ideology. Finally, you partake in the penetration of Canada by American consumerism, and the regions of Canada by the centre.

And while your disembodied voice pays lip service to the regional character of the country, in true postmodern fashion it is always a regionalism that operates on the surface. Everything, subject, product, difference is acknowledged but dehistoricized, deterritorialized, flattened, as the signs of these differences are played out. And as speech is dislocated from the body, the body is displaced further from actual market spaces, a further abstraction in the movement of capital and the market from the realm of use value to abstract exchange value. This movement is itself inscribed in the etymological tropes of the word market.

Mark: on the one hand, mark, a tract of land held in common by Teutonic or medieval communities, or mark signifying a boundary; on the other hand, mark as a target or object to be aimed at, desired object; mark, as a sign indication of something which is absent; mark as a written symbol indicating quality, as in exclamation mark; a unit of numerical reward; line indicating position; finally, mark, as a denomination of weight for gold or silver. In other words, movement from a located sensibility, a gathering of bodies within a given definable space for the buying and selling of provisions, to the marketing of goods, with no need to regard space and boundaries; the belief in the transcendence of space by the phone and the usurpation of the indeterminacy, the uncertainty of the letter, by the phone is one such micro-technology of power within the bureaucratic whole.

The final absurdity of my own telemarketing tale came with the realization that I was selling magazine subscriptions because of the necessity for these companies to maintain a steady volume of distribution to attract advertising revenue. In capital's most cynical moment, the product itself becomes irrelevant; and you become

equally cynical as your complicity involved at do not share an alternative pseudonyms appropriate to the region, know back. As you read a carefully worked sponse to possible tions, these lines hysteria increases

A new language is coded idioms, need speed up your dial language of drugs nerves, calm your dicted to the possi sale, a single con wears on and you a quota: c.c's, compl home; n.i., not in answer; d.a., dead dead on answering your ruse of sympathy the answer of the target cannot rene because he is dead your efficient, con pleasantly professi quickly try to recal personally, as you script. You are em sound of the bereav



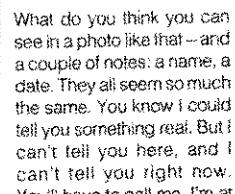
What do you think you can see in a photo like that - and a couple of notes: a name, a date. They all seem so much the same. You know I could tell you something real. But I can't tell you here, and I can't tell you right now. You'll have to call me.

I'm at (416) 979-7493.



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equally cynical as you realize the duplicity involved at 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 help speed up your dialing. You employ the language of drugs to soothe your nerves, calm your frenzy. 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.o.a., dead on answering. Your shock when your ruse of sympathy is revealed by the answer of the other that your target cannot renew his subscription because he is dead. A shroud smothers your efficient, confident, cheerful, pleasantly 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 momentary 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 over 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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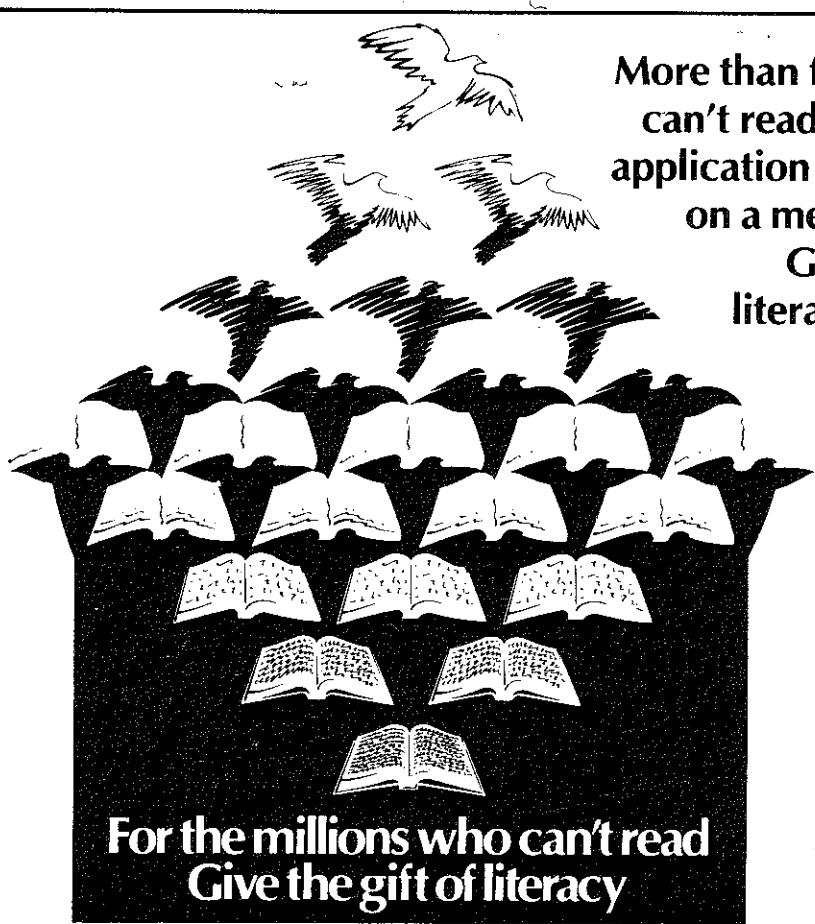
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