1-800-CAPTIVE

Site shows you how to break the bonds of unbearable customer service calls

When you call a company for customer service and are greeted by an electronic voice claiming, "in order to serve you better we have changed our menu options," followed by instructions to press different numbers for various services — or you are commanded to speak to the machine — you know that you are about to lose a large and valuable chunk of your time.

You have just entered the "phone maze." It will be a miracle if you get out with what you went in for after only one try. The more likely scenario is that you will be held prisoner and forced to press buttons endlessly before being put on hold. Then, after waiting for an eternity on hold, you will finally talk to a human being — but it won't be the one you really need. Plus, that person will have a heavy accent that is impossible to understand.

KEVIN O'NEILL
InSites

Phone prison

You will give this total stranger all of your important personal and financial information. You will then be informed that you've reached the wrong department and will be transferred to another person. After waiting on hold for another 20 minutes you will finally get to speak to the new person. Even though you know this person is looking at a computer screen with your entire life story displayed on it, you will be forced to repeat all of your important personal and financial information.

Of course, this person won't be able to help you either, so the entire scenario will be repeated several times until you are finally disconnected. Then you get to call the company again and start all over. The phone cord has become a chain that holds you captive.

Free at last, free at last!

Technology has gotten you into this mess and maybe, just maybe, it can get you out. **GetHuman.com** is a website with a mission to release you from the phone prison as quickly and painlessly as possible.

The site has a database of customer service information for thousands of companies around the world. It claims to have the best phone numbers to get through to a human being, as well as shortcuts to skip through the recorded menus.

In addition to phone numbers, the site also has options for contacting customer support. Many companies have email and live chat features that allow you to seek support through the website rather than over the phone. GetHuman also has a "call back" feature for many companies. Give them your phone number and they will call you back when support staff are available.

The site is fairly easy to use. There's a search field at the top of the home page in which you can type in the name of the company you want to contact. That takes you to a page with the best phone number to use, a call back link if the company supports it and a link for all other contact information available.

Next to the phone number is the average wait time you can expect to endure. There also are specific tips to skip over the automated prompts to get to the end quicker. The customer service hours for the company are also listed. Below the contact information are customer reviews, ratings and tips.

I went to GetHuman's Comcast page to test the site's functions and read the comments. Judging by the majority of the posted comments, Comcast is not making a lot of friends with its customer service.

They've got your number

Granted, if you call a company and sail through the process with no problems, you probably don't think to go online and sing its praises. After all, competence from large companies should be expected, not celebrated. But if you suffer through a phone maze nightmare you're more likely to seek a place to vent your frustration.

The website has a fairly simple design that's easy enough to navigate. My main complaint with the layout is the placement of ads that are single lines of text right in the middle of the content. It's visually confusing and could be easily solved with better ad placement and design.

I like the idea of GetHuman, but I really wasn't able to test its effectiveness. I just couldn't subject myself to the slow torture of a customer service call if it wasn't absolutely necessary. Unfortunately, the odds are that I'll get a chance to test it sooner than I'd like.

KEVIN O'NEILL is a graphic artist for The Times-Tribune. Contact him at koneill@timesshamrock.com with links to your favorite websites.