

Former telemarketer gives the inside story

By Robert McGuire
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A lot of the phone calls I make as a newspaper reporter are regarded as annoying. Some people hate to hear from me, assuming that every story I work on is Watergate.

For example, I might call to do a story about a local resident who won the world basket-weaving championship, and when he hears the word "reporter" he dives for cover.

It's as if Mike Wallace were on his front step threatening to do a brain scan to uncover his deepest sinful thoughts.

But if people sometimes confuse me with the journalists who hounded Princess Diana to her death, I'm more popular than I was. I was compared to my days in the most despicable of all jobs.

I was a telemarketer.

It's awful to confess, but I spent half the summer after my junior year in college calling strangers during television prime time and pleading with them to buy memberships in various discount clubs.

If they would authorize me to charge their credit card account 50 bucks, they were entitled to 10 percent discounts at several major automotive repair chains. Later on it was pharmacies.

As soon as I had made enough money to keep myself fueled with macaroni and Prego for the rest of the summer, I quit the job in a fit of youthful righteousness.

The final straw was when I sold a discount at prescription eyeglass retailers to a woman who told me she was legally blind.

The problem was, I was too good at the job, better than most at winning that 50-cent bonus for every sale over my quota. Almost everyone regarded my phone calls as annoying. (There was the occasional lunatic who answered, "Well, how are you? How can I help you

tonight?") But there were plenty who shelled out the money anyway.

The place where I worked, on the outskirts of Cedar Rapids, Iowa, employed an army of college kids who sat in this giant room filled with cubicles. We each had a phone with a headset and a computer, and in front of us were bulletin boards covered with our scripts.

The scripts were universal in scope. Whatever a person could say to us, we could find something on the bulletin board to steer the conversation back to making a sale.

If they screamed, "I wish you would drop dead and be buried with a telephone that rings till the second coming," I would say, "Yes, many of our satisfied customers have expressed a wish for a world of divine justice, and that's why we're offering this special opportunity to get valuable discounts at the country's major muffler repair and oil change professionals for an entire year."

There was only one response from a potential customer that we couldn't answer — a click followed by a dial tone.

And that's news you can use from an industry insider. When you get a call from a telemarketer you don't want to buy from, or even hear a pitch from, don't apologize, don't make excuses, don't say you already own one, don't say you just lost your job or that they've called the wrong number or that you're busy right now. Don't pretend you're somebody else and say that you are dead. Do not say you're not interested at this time.

Just hang up the phone. Telemarketers who have been at the job more than a few hours won't think you're rude. They'll think you're the smartest person they've called all night.

But if a newspaper reporter calls, just go ahead and tell me what closet the skeletons are in. I'll find out your secret to championship basket-weaving eventually.