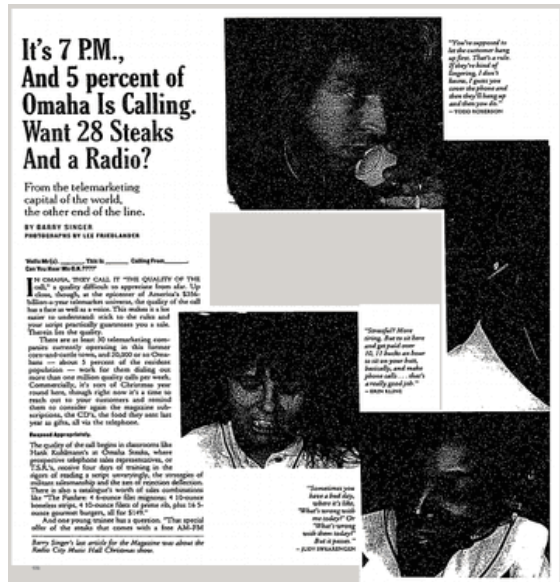


It's 7 P.M., And 5 percent of Omaha Is Calling. Want 28 Steaks And aRadio?

By Barry Singer

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'Hello Mr(s). -. This Is - Calling From - . Can You Hear Me O.K.?????.'

IN OMAHA, THEY CALL IT "THE QUALITY OF THE call," a quality difficult to appreciate from afar. Up close, though, at the epicenter of America's \$356-billion-a-year telemarket universe, the quality of the call has a face as well as a voice. This makes it a lot easier to understand: stick to the rules and your script practically guarantees you a sale. Therein lies the quality.

There are at least 30 telemarketing companies currently operating in this former corn-and-cattle town, and 20,000 or so Omahans -- about 5 percent of the resident population -- work for them dialing out more than one million quality calls per week. Commercially, it's sort of Christmas year round here, though right now it's a time to reach out to your customers and remind them to consider again the magazine subscriptions, the CD's, the food they sent last year as gifts, all via the telephone.

Respond Appropriately.

The quality of the call begins in classrooms like Hank Kuhlmann's at Omaha Steaks, where prospective telephone sales representatives, or T.S.R.'s, receive four days of training in the rigors of reading a script unvaryingly, the strategies of militant salesmanship and the zen of rejection deflection. There is also a catalogue's worth of sales combinations like "The Fanfare: 4 6-ounce filet mignons; 4 10-ounce boneless strips, 4 10-ounce filets of prime rib, plus 16 5-ounce gourmet burgers, all for \$149."

And one young trainee has a question. "That special offer of the steaks that comes with a free AM-FM radio," she says. "Can I get that at the company store?"

Kuhlmann blinks. "Well, no, dear, but you can get those steaks there so cheaply with your employee discount that you can buy yourself a good radio with the savings."

"But I want the deal with the radio."

The classroom is silent, the students annoyed -- possibly with the young woman, possibly with the teacher. "But you can buy yourself a radio," he says.

Another hand is up. "I just switched my phone service to A T & T and they gave me a free radio just for switching. So all you have to do is change over your long-distance service next time they call, if you really want a radio."

The trainee smiles. Kuhlmann sort of smiles, too.

If You Are Cut Off at the Beginning: 'I'm Surprised to Hear That, Mr(s). -!'

Every day, telemarket advertisements shout everything else in The Omaha World-Herald help-wanted section: "Omaha Catches Gold Fever! People Are Winning Right Now!" Hourly rates are worded oddly: "\$11 hr. -- \$8.30/hr. Truly Guaranteed." Per-sale commission rates are absent. "There are so many, many variables," says David Haller, a native Omahan who, with a mixture of military efficiency and neighborly effusiveness, runs this branch office of Dial America, a national telemarketing sales organization. "The tougher the product is to sell," Haller continues, "the higher the payback."

"I have this real foresight of being a millionaire before I'm 30," says 22-year-old Eric Jamison, a child-veteran of America's Haitian military intervention who has pursued Omaha's best commission rates all over town, and now dials for Haller, selling mostly magazine subscriptions. "I'm earning \$100 a day, I sleep in, come in at 1, work till 9:30, go home and start fresh. It beats marching with a pack and hell, before I die, I'll own this place."

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Though many people do hustle together 40-hour workweeks, in a sense everyone works part time, with college students, housewives and retirees dominating. Whether pushing perishables or periodicals, long-distance service or life insurance, they guarantee that this Middle Western metropolis, once tied to the soil and the seasons, is now tethered to the rest of the nation by fiber-optic cable and three-a-day phone shifts, from 8:30 A.M. to 9:30 P.M.

The curtain goes up promptly seven days a week, and no one can afford a bad show. Not the hovering young supervisors, not the mute "quality assurance" staff members and especially not "the talent," the chorus of T.S.R.'s. This is community theater, a repertory company of neighbors, and in the precurtain moments before the calling begins, recipes are exchanged, University of Nebraska football is debated. Almost every telemarketing operation requires its employees to punch a time clock. Certain workers, mostly men, show up lugging their thermoses and sandwiches. When the bell sounds, though, and the lights go up on computer screens, only the script matters.

'We'll Continue Your Service, And Bill You Later by Mail in Four Easy Installments if You Wish. O.K.????'

Why Omaha? "Well, so much of it is the work ethic," Haller says. "And we've got that great flat accent."

"Nah," mutters Steve Idelman, chairman of ITI Marketing, one of Omaha's largest telemarketing groups. He sums up the city's attractions as he sees them. "One: the Strategic Air Command over in Offutt Air Force Base; they built one of the first fiber-optic networks in the U.S. Two: Northwestern Bell. It took that huge phone capacity and in the 60's and 70's lured hotel reservation and bank card centers to Omaha. Three: Guys like me working out of our basements with three phones somewhere; we discovered in the 80's that Omaha real estate, Omaha living costs, Omaha wages were way low, the work force here was pretty well educated and best of all, Omaha is right in the middle of the country -- easy access to both coasts, all four time zones. Four, Five, Six, Seven, Eight! Nine: The phone company would install a new 800 line here in one day. One day! And the legislature is pro-business. 10! Soon I'm looking for a bigger house."

Continue With Presentation And Close!!!!

On one ITI selling floor today, jellybeans are the coin of the realm: hit your hourly sales quota and catch the candy literally lobbed your way. Over at Omaha Steaks, a T.S.R. known as Vanessa admits she prefers this selling name, assigned by the company from a baby book, to her own; no two T.S.R.'s at Steaks work under the same name. Down the road, a 22-year-old Dial America rep explains that he cannot look at a telephone once he's home from a shift. An even younger rep disagrees. "I have to make a call right when I get home," he says, "just to have one normal phone conversation."

"We need them," Haller says. "For me, unmanned phones mean I'm losing money. For them, well, something brings them in here; some debt, some bill. Then they may pay things off and stop. So I'll call or write. I'll ask them, 'Don't you have any other bills?' "

'Thank You and Have a Nice Day/Evening.'

Eric Jamison has it all figured out. "In today's society," he says, "people don't know what they want. So you gotta tell them." On the other end of the line, the number of adult Americans ordering products or services by telephone currently stands at more than 67 million, rising at the rate of 3.1 percent a year. For each party -- the companies, the callers and those who are called -- the quality of the call functions as a guarantor, as both an industry standard and an implicit threat; it's Omaha's way of insuring that everybody will in the end get what he wants.

Or as Jamison says: "That's how we see it out here in Omaha; society's all messed up out there. They need you to tell them what they want." And what if they don't? He grins. "If they hang up on you -- oh well. Hope you're doing fine. You're still my best friend."