

# The New York Times

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NEW YORK, WEDNESDAY, JULY 16, 2008

## *For Half a Cent, a Call That Informs, and Annoys*

By KEN BELSON

At Newswalk, a 168-unit condominium building in Prospect Heights, Brooklyn, doormen have for years let residents know they have packages by putting little yellow sticky notes on their mailboxes. They still do that, but now many residents receive automated phone calls or e-mail alerts, too.

"At first, I thought the calls were spam," said James Caldwell, 42, who prefers the paper notes for their human touch. "It's another assault on my senses. Some things are overkill."

Cooper Square Realty, which

manages Newswalk and 200 other apartment buildings in New York City, uses computerized calls not just for package notices but also to tell residents when there are condo board meetings, building repairs, service interruptions or emergencies. And Cooper Square's alerts are often sandwiched between automated calls from airlines, doctors, pharmacists and other businesses that are increasingly using this technological tool, which began two decades ago as an emergency notification system.

More companies are buying automated dialers, or contracting with call centers to do the work, because the price per call has

fallen to as low as half a cent, from 25 cents in the 1980s, said Paul Kowal, an industry consultant. Dialers can call thousands of phone numbers in seconds.

The growing number of "robocalls" has alarmed privacy lovers, people who need their phones constantly and those who resist the onslaught of commercialism. Amid thousands of complaints, the Federal Trade Commission expects, as soon as this summer, to revise its regulations to bar such calls unless customers have given express permission.

Under the current rules, auto-

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called calls are allowed when the callers have established business relationships with those they dial, as when a doctor's office calls to confirm an appointment—as long as no products are being promoted. But Allen W. Hille, assistant director of the trade commission's division of marketing practices, said that "established business relationship" is broadly defined and that plenty of companies use the same technology to flout the rules by calling indiscriminately and pumping products.

"The general trend is, of course, we want a call from the airline saying that a flight was canceled," Mr. Hille said. "But there is a certain antipathy to sales calls. You feel powerless."

The issue of automated sales calls arouses a passionate response. More than 13,000 comments have poured into the trade commission, most of them arguing against any relaxation of existing do-not-call rules and 2,100 of them complaints about invasion of privacy, according to the commission. Many said prerecorded messages were a more abusive intrusion than live telemarketing calls because, as Marjorie Myers of Pennsylvania put it,

"You can't interrupt, you can't ask questions and you can't respond."

James Savage of Florida called telemarketers "a cancer on this nation," while Joseph Schiraldi of Colorado said that "giving the telemarketers a self-regulating environment is like giving an alcoholic the keys to the liquor store." And Marlon Lee Sanders, an on-call engineer from Florida, said that automated phone calls fill up voice-mail boxes, which "could create a hazardous situation, since I work in the chemical industry."

Experts in the call-center industry said that no one tracks the number of robocalls. But Jon Arlton, who runs the Center for Consumer Driven Quality at Purdue University—a research organization for call centers—estimated that it is in the billions; an e-mail survey of his 46,000 members suggested that 41 percent do automated outbound calls, each dialing an average of 5.3 million dings a year.

The largest group of callers, he said, consists of companies (or vendors for them) in health care, followed by telecommunications and technology companies. But the trend is spreading to unusual places.

"The calls are coming from my



ANGELA VOHRI/THE NEW YORK TIMES  
A doorman scans a package's bar code; soon, the tenant will get a computerized call.

daughter's high school, from my pharmacy that my prescriptions have been filled and if my plane is late," said Tim Searcy, the chief executive of the American Tele-services Association in Indianapolis. But, Mr. Searcy said, there are also "prerecorded messages that have been used for fraudulent calls because they're so cheap."

The looming crackdown by the federal government is part of a broader backlash against the avalanche of phone calls, including those from legitimate telemarketers, charities and political candidates who are allowed to dial any number not on do-not-call lists.

"The levels of intrusion are higher with phone calls com-

pared to e-mail," said James Katz, the director of the Center for Mobile Communication Studies at Rutgers University. "So it had better be worthwhile if you're going to quicken someone's pulse. These calls can get very irritating."

Sull, Mr. Katz said that people welcome automated calls, even those made by indifferent computers, when they are useful to their immediate needs. Nancy Poletti, a working mother of two who lives in Short Hills, N.J., said, for example, that she appreciates automated calls from Walgreens when her prescriptions are ready.

"Trying to work and raise kids has made me a mental wreck, so having that little reminder is handy," said Mrs. Poletti, who gets the calls on her home phone. "I don't care whether it's a robot that helps me with my life."

Jehliue, one of many airlines that use the technology, has made 60,000 automated calls about canceled flights and arranged 95,000 about schedule changes so far this year.

At Weill Cornell Medical Associates in Manhattan, the receptionists were often too busy to call more than half the patients in advance of their impending appointments. But since the office

adopted an automated calling system two years ago, software scans a database to select appointments two days hence and sends the names to Televox, a company based in Mobile, Ala., that dials their numbers with a prerecorded one-minute message.

"From an administrative point of view, it frees up our time," said Lillian Chua, the office administrator, who said that about two-thirds of the calls are typically left on answering machines.

Bay Ridge Toyota, a Brooklyn car dealership, uses automated calls not just to tell customers when to come in for tune-ups, but to wish them happy birthday.

Washington Mutual Bank automatically calls customers when mortgage payments are past due.

At Newsweek, where residents receive about 75 packages a day, the doorman scans the ones with bar codes and type extra information, like the name of the sender, into a computer. Deliveries of flowers and dry cleaning are typed in, too. Hit "save," and a call is automatically made to whatever phone numbers the residents provided. Then, the doorman scribble the number of the apartment and the number of packages on a sticky note and affix it to the resident's mailbox.

Gzim Gezi, who generally is on the door in the afternoons, said the new system is not necessarily easier, because the computer can run slow or freeze. "With the old logbook, we just used to write the resident's name and date," he said.

David Lee, who lives at Newsweek and gets about three packages a week, said the alerts were "kind of alarming at first" but that he liked them. "We're in the honeymoon phase," he said, adding that the sticky notes would be eliminated once residents are used to the system.

Newsweek's management company, Cooper Square, also used the system earlier this year to alert residents at another building, the Carnegie Hill Tower on East 94th Street, that access to the garage would be blocked and that cars parked on the street would be towed. David Kuperberg, Cooper Square's president, said the company has phone numbers for 70 percent to 90 percent of residents, who can choose what number they want dialed or opt out of the calls altogether.

"Sometimes, people think automatic phone calls are an annoyance," Mr. Kuperberg acknowledged. But "in my business, no one has ever accused me of overcommunicating."