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Hang up the telephone hotlines—go digital!

By Scott Lane

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Since Alexander Graham Bell was awarded the first patent for the telephone in 1876, telephones have proved to be a vital and popular way to communicate. That is until recently.

Since the digital age began, each subsequent generation has become increasingly reliant on this technology and more averse to spoken words. If you want to move funds, you now use your banking app instead of calling the bank, and rarely do we call a friend or a colleague without messaging them first. And what would we do without instant access to news, social media, and business applications on our mobile devices?

Yet with all these advances in communication technology, some companies are still emotionally tied to telephone hotlines.

By 2025, 75% of the global workforce will be millennials.^[1] Recent studies show that the millennial generation prefers text-based communications over phone calls, so they can receive, contemplate, and reply to messages at their leisure. They see phone calls as disruptive and intrusive to their day-to-day plans. Digitally written communication provides the ability for one to think over their words, so it is simply a more comfortable and precise form of communication. Further, the *2019 Global Business Ethics Survey* conducted by the Ethics & Compliance Initiative highlighted that telephone hotlines were the least popular channel—used by only 6% of people that reported misconduct.^[2]

When we consider all of this, it is clear why this method has seen a steady decline in use over the last decade.

Moving on from telephone hotlines

When compared to new digital channels, telephone hotlines have many drawbacks, including the following.

Inconsistent quality

Depending on the call handler, a reporter could have an entirely different experience. Call Handler A may have just started their shift and will most likely be alert and patient. Call Handler B, however, may be about to finish their shift while thinking more about how they have a train to catch in ten minutes. Even with the utmost professionalism and training, Call Handler B is likely to have taken a number of reports already that day during their eight-hour shift and will be mentally drained, lack patience, and be eager to complete the call quickly. Even Call Handler A may not deliver the expected level of service due to personal issues, stress, or dissatisfaction in the role.

The simple fact that call handlers are human means there is no way to keep the report-taking process consistent unless they are given a script to follow word for word. In which case, why is a human required when we have technology that can handle this process?

Technology provides reporters with consistent and high-quality service.

Language capability

Again, when discussing interpreters, we are dealing with humans, so the same issues as above apply with interpreters.^[3] On top of this, although the interpreter speaks the language, regional dialects can give rise to misunderstandings. At best, the report may be distorted; at worst, it can be incomprehensible.

Feedback on interpreters is mixed, with the quality often being called into question. The nuances of compliance and legal terminology and the difficult subject matter being discussed mean that the quality of an interpreter can have a huge impact. For example, Patricia Michelsen-King was observing the proceedings in a Chesterfield, Virginia, courtroom a few years ago when a man shouted in Spanish from the back of the courtroom, “I didn’t rape anybody!” Michelsen-King, who teaches Spanish interpretation at Virginia Commonwealth University, said the outburst was the result of bad translation from his court interpreter. Though the man was accused of running a red light, his interpreter told him he was accused of a “violación,” which in Spanish does not mean “violation,” but “rape.”

The interpreter should have used the word “infracción,” said Michelsen-King, who was in the courtroom because she was about to begin working there as an interpreter, too. When she approached the distressed man, he was sitting with his interpreter, admitting to the traffic offense but firmly denying what he thought was a rape charge.

And, although third-party interpreters sign confidentiality agreements, sensitive information is still being made known to a human outside of the company, representing unnecessary risk.

In addition, the time it takes to secure interpreters can be lengthy, and sometimes interpreters cannot be sourced at all. Ask yourself, how long would you wait before hanging up? Would you then use a different channel to report, or would you not make a report at all? In many cases, you only have one opportunity to get the report.

Today’s digital voice assistants have the capability to convert speech to text and then translate that text. While machine translation can prove to be tricky for large passages of text (though in most cases it still gets the general message across), for short phrases and small amounts of text, translation accuracy for core language pairs such as English-Spanish, English-French, and English-Chinese, is near perfect.^[4]

The same applies to written digital channels. A typical written hotline report through a web portal is made up of pre-selected text to choose from and maybe a free text field or two. If the translation does not make complete sense, there is always the option of having it professionally translated. The likelihood is, most reports won’t require professional translation, saving time and money on third-party translations.

Technical reliability

Telephones often involve legacy technology. Many developing nations are bypassing landlines and personal computers to focus on mobile internet connectivity. Often lines cease to work and the company doesn’t know until a would-be whistleblower informs them. This reflects badly on the company and the whistleblowing program.

Additionally, the quality of telephone connections in developing countries can be poor, meaning the conversation can become fractured and difficult for the reporter, call handler, and interpreter to hear and understand. This frustration can lead to the reporter ending the call without completing their report.

Time constraints

The convenience of written digital channels means reporters can consider their answers carefully and take a break if they need to. You cannot pause a hotline call if something arises that needs your immediate attention. Even with the breaks, it typically takes a shorter amount of time to report through a digital channel than it does by phone. In a world where time is a critical commodity, reporters will likely choose the speediest channel for making a report.

Increased anxiety

A telephone hotline requires an emotional commitment by the reporter. In most cases, it has taken courage and time to make the decision to raise a concern. Having to report the issue to another human being increases the level of anxiety for many people as they feel that they may be judged.

While we know that call handlers are trained to handle these situations, fear and anxiety prevent many people from calling a hotline. Digital channels are preferred by the majority because they are more anonymous and there is zero chance of being judged.

Restrictive question sets

Telephone hotlines operate with a script of sorts. Although call handlers can go off script, they are discouraged from doing so to avoid getting off topic. This poses a problem.

Although there are standard questions that need to be asked (who, what, where, when), different categories of concern require different questions. A report of fraud will require information such as the type of fraud and the amounts involved, whereas a report on discrimination will not.

A restrictive script means that only certain information can be captured, and this could result in an investigator having to reach out to the reporter to ask some more questions. There is no guarantee the reporter will engage, and if they don't, the case can't be investigated thoroughly. Therefore, restrictive scripts on both hotlines and digital channels are problematic. Depending on the category of the report, the questions should reflect the information that is required to conduct an investigation.

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