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Pssst! They're listening when you're on hold

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MELVILLE, N.Y. -- It is the opening line on so many phone conversations these days: This call may be monitored for quality assurance purposes.

The taped message is so common that many callers might assume that no one is ever listening, let alone taking notes. But they would be wrong.

Monitoring is intended to track the performance of call center operators, but the professional snoops are inadvertently monitoring callers, too. Most callers do not realize that they may be taped even while they are on hold.

It is at these times that monitors hear husbands arguing with their wives, mothers yelling at their children and dog owners throwing fits at disobedient pets, all when they think no one is listening. Most times, the only way a customer can avoid being recorded is to hang up.

"You could have a show on Broadway just playing the calls," said Mike Schrider, president of J.Lodge, a call-monitoring service based in Hammonton, N.J.

Call monitors eavesdrop on millions of exchanges a year, and listening to the mumblings and rants of people on hold comes with the job. Overall, about 2 percent of the hundreds of millions of calls made to call centers are monitored by a company's own managers or, increasingly, by third-party monitoring companies.

Tapping into calls from his cubicle in Melville, N.Y., Stuart Pike is one of an army of listeners employed by these companies. He has an unrestricted view of how corporate America deals with the public -- and how the public talks back.

The business of assessing the behavior of operators has taken on a new urgency in recent years. With so many companies selling similar products at similar prices, competent and professional customer-service agents are more and more the difference between a sale and a lost opportunity, a burnished brand and a tarnished one.

That reality has turned third-party call monitoring into a fast-growing industry watching over the nation's 6 million call-center operators as well as hundreds of thousands offshore. And people like Pike, who listens to about 150 calls a week, have become the equivalent of factory foremen policing America's service economy.

Recently, Pike stumbled onto a call where a young male customer was flirting with a female service agent at a cell phone company. After some giggles and banter, the woman relented and gave her personal phone number to the customer. Pike quickly alerted the cell phone company to the phone date.

"You'd be surprised how casual it can get," said Pike, who works at Aon Consulting, one of the nation's biggest third-party call-center monitors. "It's like watching TV. There's always something interesting on."

Some privacy advocates worry that monitors, as well as operators, can steal customer passwords and other sensitive data. Thus far, few documented cases of identity theft have been unearthed involving monitors, and most monitoring companies screen their applicants. State wiretapping laws generally do not provide protection against recording of call-center conversations (the taped message at the start of the call is, in most cases, considered an adequate privacy warning).

Fears of identity theft have not slowed the monitoring business. In fact, under tighter scrutiny by regulators, most financial institutions are now taping all their calls.

The growth of monitoring has also been fueled by the advent of Internet phone technology, which has substantially cut the cost of long-distance calls and made call monitoring as easy as clicking a mouse. Sophisticated software that automatically records conversations has increased the number of calls monitors can assess.

As more call centers move offshore, companies are starting to outsource the monitoring, too. From any corner of the globe, call monitors with just a computer and an Internet connection can oversee workers virtually anywhere. For instance, Pike on Long Island listens to service agents in India who may be talking to customers in Indiana. Monitors in Britain are likely to listen to customers in New York talking to German operators in Frankfurt.

HyperQuality, which is based in Seattle, has 100 call monitors in New Delhi who eavesdrop on call-center workers around the United States.

In effect, monitors have become referees on an international scale. "We act as the conscience of the company," said Paul Kowal, the president of Kowal Associates, an industry consultant and a third-party monitor.

Sometimes, refereeing means reporting off-color calls like the flirtation that Pike overheard. Plenty of other calls also raise red flags, including customers and operators who shout, swear, talk politics or threaten bodily harm. Anyone hanging up -- either an operator or an angry customer -- sends out warnings, too.

Just a few years ago, most companies simply ranked their operators on how quickly they picked up calls and ended them. Now call monitors rate operators by checking off boxes on detailed electronic questionnaires that assess qualities such as efficiency, conversational skills and ability to mollify frustrated customers. The scores from each monitored call are collected to rank an operator's performance.

Operators who can defuse aggression -- a not-insignificant talent -- win plaudits. Operators also have to deal with the slow talkers, the lonely chatterers and the absent-minded. At night, the drunks come out.

Hearing this hidden side of American commerce turns the monitors into amateur experts in American phone etiquette.

"Bad calls stick in my mind because I can't believe what I've heard," said Renee Rea, who sits a few rows from Pike in a room silent except for fingers tapping on keyboards.

To do the job, Rea and her colleagues need an aptitude for listening, a rare commodity in a culture where the opposite of talking is waiting to talk. Indeed, finding monitors willing to sit in silence all day is not easy, and turnover is a problem for jobs that involve a mix of industrial psychology and Marketing 101.

Monitors typically score operators on their "openings," like the friendliness of their greeting. They flag annoying habits like using run-on sentences, and even gauge the mood of calls.

Operators are given demerits for transferring customers without asking, keeping someone on hold too long and blaming others instead of trying to solve problems.

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