

# EDITORIAL

## THE PLASTIC MESSAGE

**W**e recently moved from New York to Georgia. This culminated a year of great change. The State University of New York, State College of Optometry (SUNY) moved its location during the summer of 2000. This was my “home away from home” for about 25 years. Then, in September of that year, I became Distinguished Service Professor Emeritus and started my retirement from SUNY. We contracted on the house in Georgia during December and closed on both houses within a week during late May.

Things went relatively smoothly during all these transitions. The only major glitch was that after we had been assured telephone service would be available immediately, we were subsequently informed that we would be without it for at least a month. This put us out of commission in cyberspace because the provider of cable service also told us that they couldn't promise anything till at least September. It would be in poor taste to disclose the telephone provider's name; however, since we've moved **south**, I don't have to ring a **bell** for you to make an educated guess. We were able to survive with our cell phone and ran up a bill of about \$500 overtime charges. But that's another story.

We had made a list of the various institutions and agencies to be informed of our new address, phone number and other vital data once we moved. Some

of this was done by mail, but in many instances it had to be done by phone....cell phone, that is. And remember, that we couldn't go on-line. Beyond these anticipated communications, still others came up once we were in Georgia. For example, we received mail from the gas, electric, water and trash disposal companies telling us to call. Written notification was necessary because when they called the local number we had given them, they received the “not in service at this time” message. It was then that I became an aficionado of the automated telephone answering service.

I'm certain that many, if not all of you have had to call various agencies and experienced the rigors and frustrations of automated phone answering service. I'm told that this service was developed to facilitate communication between the provider and consumer in the interest of customer satisfaction. My broad experience over the past few months indicates, with a few exceptions, that the goal has **not** been met. Rather, one is given menus whose options often do not include the reason or reasons for the consumer's call. This requires that a choice must be made that is closest to the one that is not there. Then, typically the caller is told that all agents are currently busy, but to stay on the line because “your business is important to us.” After some very lengthy waits I wondered just how important my business really was.

Now, undoubtedly, I'm oversensitive to the pitfalls of this automated service. But I now feel that there is a lack of concern on the part of the company or agency about my need to communicate in an effective and timely manner when I go through the automated drill.

This was put into sharp contrast when I had to call a local physician's office. A live person answered and was able to give me the information I needed in a concise and friendly manner. During the same week I had occasion to call an optometrist's office in another state. As the automated message began I automatically went into my negative mode. The automated voice told me that if I knew the extension I should dial it “now.” I didn't so I was told to wait for further

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automated advertisement then came on informing me of the various services the doctor provided. Then, the meant-to-be-soothing automated elevator music kicked in, and after several minutes I was privy to the local news. Some time later the automated ads came back on. Then, after a grand total of six minutes (I timed it) a receptionist greeted me.

Now for the take home message for those of you with automated answering service or are considering it—the most important issue is to determine if you truly need it. Consider the cost to benefit ratio. Both the financial and human aspects are part of the cost. I am convinced that most people feel that they are dealing with a bureaucracy when they are connected to an automated service. Is this the impression you wish to convey? This cost consideration can be significant because of the highly competitive nature of the eye and vision care arena.

And does the service really save you money? Does it allow you to have less of an administrative staff?

Determination of the benefits should not be done by staff impressions, but rather by more objective means. A survey of patients can provide good information and methods should be developed to determine if the practice is run more efficiently and effectively as the result of the service.

I believe there are alternatives to the standard automated answering service. One agency informed me that all their representatives were busy, and instructed me to leave my phone numbers for day and evening with a promise that I'd be called that day. I understood and appreciated their dilemma of too many calls for too few representatives. When I received the call that afternoon I felt that my business was truly important to the agency without the usual plastic message. Another strategy is to have a

“floating” staff member assigned to human phone answering at the times of greatest call activity in addition to the permanent receptionist.

And doctor, when was the last time you listened to your office's automated answering service?