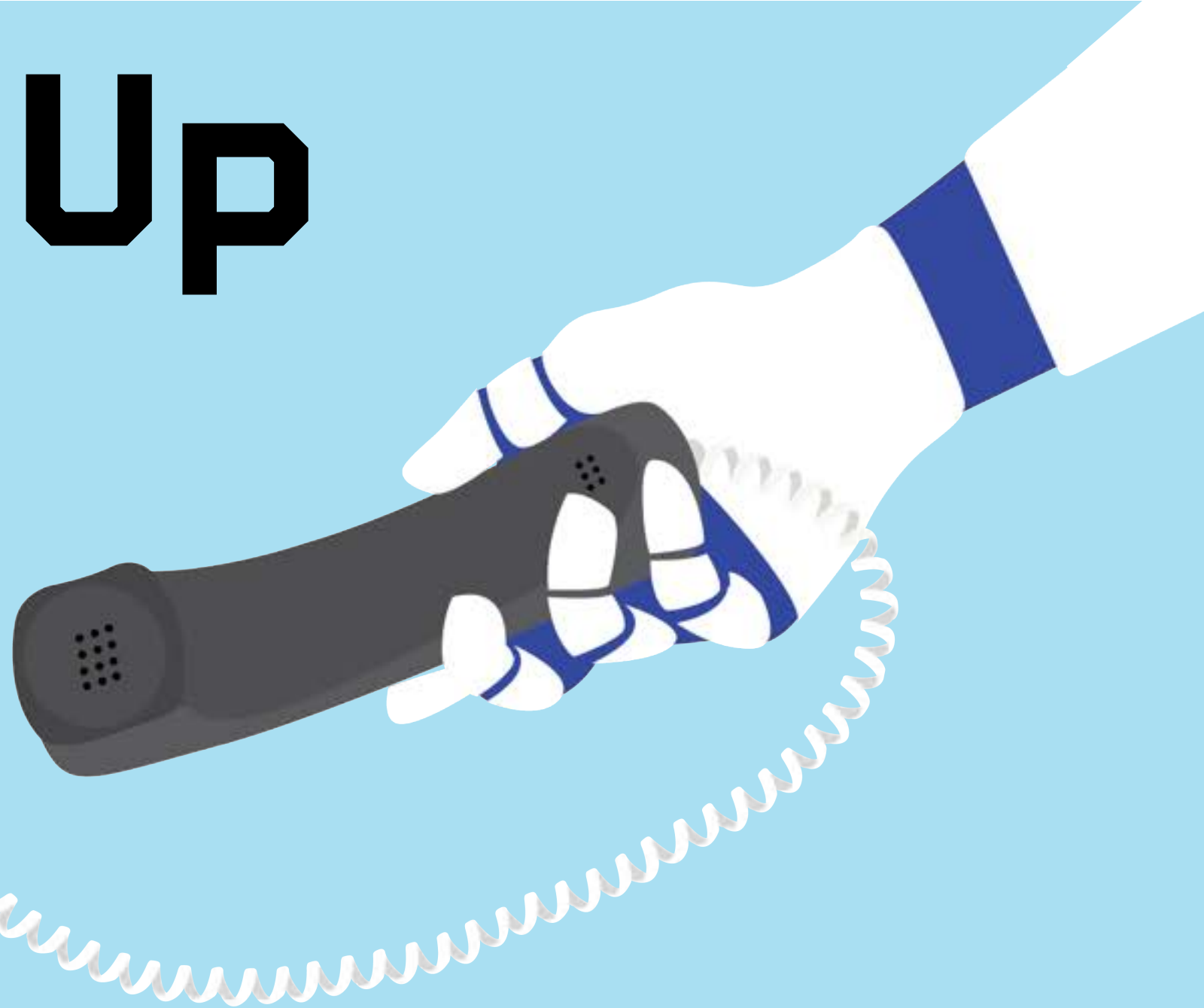


Tangled Up

A robot that has fun at a telemarketer's expense

By Nick Bilton



Roger Anderson may not seem like a superhero. But to many, he has become one. By day, Anderson is a consultant who works on phone systems, setting up phone lines for companies and the kind of networks that ask you to press 1 for this, 2 for that. He loves telephones. When he's on vacation, he visits places like the Museum of Communications in Seattle, where he takes selfies next to old telephones wires. (His wife even made him a little hat embroidered with telephones.)

But by night, he wages battles against evil telemarketers, tweaking and honing a robot that can talk endlessly to telemarketers, wasting their time so they don't have to waste yours.

“Average people harassed by telemarketers do not have many options.”

It all started a few years ago, when a telemarketer called Anderson with a pitch, and rather than talk to the sales guy, he handed the phone to his young son. The telemarketer cursed at the little boy. Enough was enough.

They may try to block callers by painstakingly entering each number into their smartphone's block list, signing up for VoIP phone services that offer spam call filters, or downloading apps like Truecaller. There is also a national Do Not Call Registry, but many calls still get through.

Anderson, however, is no ordinary telephone user, so he decided to take a crack at solving the problem in a new way.

Enter the Jolly Roger Telephone Company. Whenever Anderson hears from a telemarketer, he patches the caller through to his robot, puts his phone on mute and lets his bot do the talking.

While the simple robot does not possess anything near artificial intelligence, it does understand speech patterns and inflections, so it can monitor what the telemarketer is saying, and then do its best to try to keep the person on the end of the line engaged. Often the robot just has a little fun. Using recorded lines spoken by Anderson, it may say the following to the telemarketer: “I just woke up from a nap, I took some medicine and I'm really groggy. Can you go a little

“The idea is to keep the telemarketer on the call for as long as possible. The longer the conversation goes on, the more eccentric the robot becomes.”

slower?” Sometimes it interrupts the telemarketer to ask questions. “Do you drink coffee?” or “You sound like someone I went to high school with.”

In one sequence, the robot tells the telemarketer that a bee landed on his arm, and asks the telemarketer to keep talking as he focuses on the bee.

After seeing that the service worked, Anderson made it freely available to anyone; it works with landlines (with conference call or three-way calling service) and cellphones. To send telemarketing calls

to the robot, add the phone number 214-666-4321 to your address book. Then, the next time you get a call from a telemarketer, patch the number in, merge the calls and put your phone on mute while the robot does the talking.

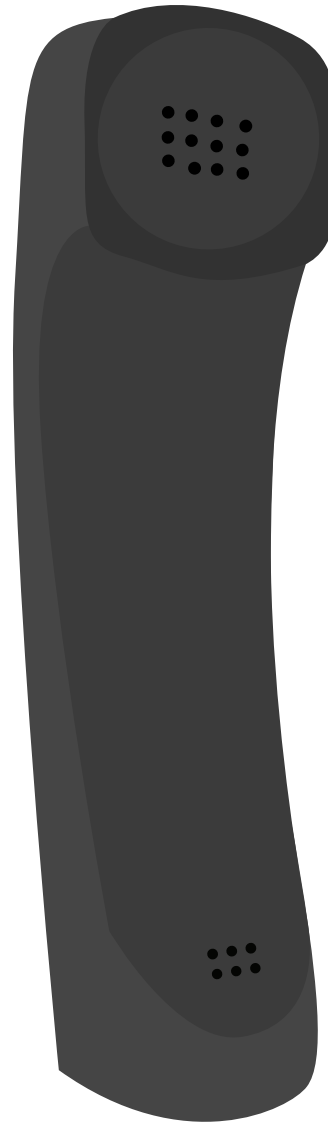
For Anderson, this service isn't just about wasting the time of people who want to waste our time. He sees his service as a way to help ordinary people, especially older Americans, from being defrauded.

According to reports from industry groups and companies trying to thwart telemarketers, the telemarketing industry wastes tens of billions of dollars a year in time. The Federal Trade Commission said that in 2015 it received 3.6 million complaints about unwanted telemarketer calls. And the National Association of Attorneys General says that millions of Americans are defrauded by illicit telemarketers every year.

“It's really scary to hear how these telemarketers are trying to scam people,” Anderson said. “There really is no way to protect yourself. You can not answer the phone, but they're going to call you again tomorrow and the day after that.”

And people are eager to use the robot. This month, after Gizmodo, the technology blog, wrote about the Jolly Roger Telephone Company, the robot's number has been ringing off the hook. There have been over 70,000 calls to the bot, Anderson said, most lasting for three or four minutes.

But recently, one of the calls went for 22 minutes. It was from a cable company that called to try to get a customer to sign up for bigger, better, faster cable.



“Whenever you ask the robot a question, it always replies ‘yes,’” Anderson said. “So it kept signing it up for all the sports packages and high-speed services that the cable telemarketer offered.”

Anderson feels as if he's truly helping people with his robot. He's spending nights and weekends perfecting it. (His young son is even helping to monitor the calls that come into the phone line.) And he recently started a Kickstarter campaign with the hope of perfecting the bot. He's also trying to cover the cost of all those incoming calls.

But his ultimate goal is bigger.

“My dream is to disrupt the autodialers,” he said. These are the robocallers that can dial 10,000 phone numbers a day and are able to detect if an answering service or human being answers the call. In other words, Anderson wants his robot to do battle against other robots. That sounds like a superhero to me.



An abbreviated history of telemarketing

1876

Alexander Graham Bell invents the telephone

1957

DialAmerica starts operations with two call centers, one inbound and one outbound, resembling something similar to what we now know as telemarketing

1981

For the first time, telemarketing expenditures in the U.S. exceed the expenditures for direct mail.

1983

Tony Inocentes uses his telemarketing machine from his collection agency business to announce his candidacy for political office — the earliest example of a robocall. Inocentes lost his campaign, but would later invent political robo polling in 2001.

1991

The Telephone Consumer Protection Act is passed to regulate automated calls.

2003

The FTC opens the National Do Not Call Registry to allow consumers to request that telemarketers not contact them.

2020

Congress passes the bipartisan Telephone Robocall Abuse Criminal Enforcement and Deterrence Act, or TRACED Act, increases fines on spam robocallers from \$1,500 to as much as \$10,000 per illegal call.