

Outbound's Steamy Situation

Is giving consumers more power the way to combat dialer abuse?

Many predictive dialers are used responsibly by outbound telemarketers, but some are not. This, combined with increasing consumer awareness and concern about nuisance calls, is prompting national marketing organizations to think about what steps they should take to safeguard consumers' interests and ensure a healthy outbound market in the long term.

A well-designed predictive dialer will launch calls so that the expected number of answered calls equates to the number of available agents, given that some numbers are expected to be busies, no answers and so on.

But any time you dial out on more trunks than you have agents, you run the risk of making nuisance calls.

The Steam-Valve Theory

There are three types of nuisance calls:

- When the phone stops ringing before the recipient can reasonably answer;
- When the recipient is kept waiting after answering until an agent becomes available; or
- When a call is abandoned by the dialer as soon as the recipient picks up because no agent is available to attend to the call.

These nuisance call categories function like steam valves. When too many calls have been dialed, a predictive dialer chooses a valve to vent its surplus steam — to get rid of the calls it doesn't need.

The first two valves are closed or being closed, thanks to self-policing efforts of marketing associations and individual companies in the United Kingdom and United States. But when you shut off these two valves, you can see what happens: all the steam comes bursting out from the remaining valve — the “abandoned call valve.”

Failure to understand and account for this behavior makes nonsense of any discussion on abandoned calls. Sure, you can have zero abandoned calls, but only by re-opening valves that should remain closed!

Until recently, there was little need to place a premium on good predictive dialer design because use of “multiple steam valves” has

enabled the dialers to perform well without racking up lots of abandoned calls. Being confined to a “single steam valve” is a bigger challenge for the industry and for designers of predictive dialing systems. Expect a “rethink” of dialer design, and don't be surprised if some long-loved nostrums bite the dust, especially the one about dialers that track the progress of agents so they can determine exactly when to predial.

Avoiding an Explosion

If we can accept that two steam valves are being blocked off because of new regulatory obligations, then it makes sense to judge the potential nuisance of predictive dialers only in terms of the calls they abandon.

So why dial predictively if you are only going to upset consumers by hanging up on them when no agent is available? If you are working within a code of practice, then this is the price paid for the additional productivity that can be gained in terms of additional talk-time per agent hour.

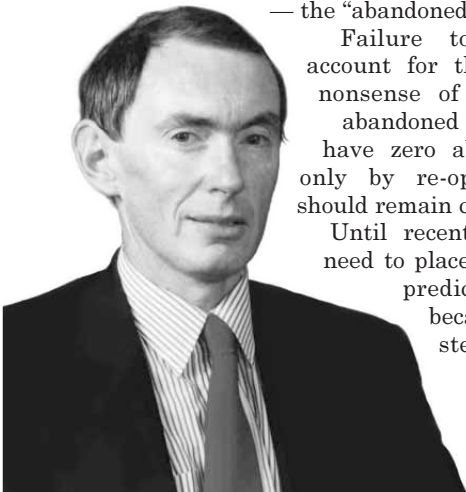
Here, good design matters. It should allow a predictive dialer to operate efficiently at no more than 5 percent abandoned calls and, in most cases, well within this limit.

Still, there are some consumers for whom one abandoned call is too much. What about them?

To have an efficient and fair outbound market, one, perhaps two things need to be implemented:

- The first is an effective way of allowing consumers to opt out of receiving calls (unless, as in some countries, the market is “opt in” in the first place). The United Kingdom already has an opt-out standard and the United States is getting there, mainly through passage of state “do not call” legislation.
- The second is the ability for a consumer to know who abandoned the call by using Caller ID or *69. Making this information “public” has been opposed in the past by outbound telemarketers, but it's very likely to happen. ■

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