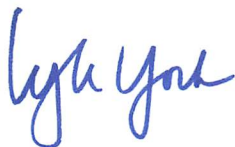


San Francisco Chronicle

Thank you for having thought of us in connection with this manuscript, which we are returning.

Unfortunately, we will not be able to make use of it.

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Lyle York". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a large initial "L".

Lyle York
Editor: This World

WHY CAN'T SOMETHING BE DONE ABOUT THE DING-A-LING HUCKSTERS?

Some days I think of Alexander G. Bell as a world-class troublemaker whose invention is a diabolical device designed to drive people mad. True, the instrument has saved lives, marriages, friendships, and sped the Lord's work, but it has also fallen into the dial-itchy fingers of twits, turkeys and slithy toves.

You're cooking dinner, waiting to catch the fabric softener cycle on a load of clothes, and perhaps changing a baby when your telephone delivers a man's voice throbbing with sexy formality. "Good afternoon, Mrs. Doe! I'm Danny Dave Butterup. And how are you today?" Of course he doesn't give an ort how you are—yours just happens to be the name his inky index finger is resting on. Even though you make discouraging little sounds he launches into his canned pitch with verve. "May I ask if you own your own home (no pause or punctuation) "Have you thought of improving it with plastic soffits and fascias?" He gulps air. "And how about storm windows?" Or water softeners. Or insulation. Or colored concrete birds teetering on one leg for the lawn.

I have interviewed over 50 victims of this blight, mostly women since they bear the brunt of it. I included friends, relatives, acquaintances and buttonholees. It takes a real dose of smoldering infuriation to make me approach a total stranger to ask questions. But the cause has become so caustic to the collective craw, so

disruptive to the daily routine that it may represent a broader base for welding the sisterhood together than that business about suffrage and equal pay.

Few women want to be rude to callers. But some of those vociferous vendors simply won't take NO for an answer. Some even become argumentative: "How do you know you aren't interested, you haven't even heard what I was going to say?" Or "Oh, but this is different, Mrs. Doe. I'm not selling anything. All you have to do is make an appointment for—". Quiet replacement of the receiver is sometimes followed with a call-back. A few become abusive.

Having raced from the shower or some other state of being indisposed, who can be pleasant to some boob who wants to sell you a cemetery plot? Or a set of encyclopedias? If you act quickly you get a bonus book entitled Be Your Own Psychiatrist or How To Analyze Your Friends. The voice oozes intimacy; "If you pick that one you can find out which ones have a little space to rent in the attic, ha-ha."

Not all the callers are men. The women begin brightly with little gimmicks like "You have been selected to participate in our special quiz. If you can answer our jack pot question you'll win an 11X14 portrait from Shudder-Bugg Studios." (Provided, naturally, that you buy a frame and 3 more poses.) The questions run the gamut of their estimated housewife's IQ—like what is the largest American city? After asking me that, one the girl gave me such clues as: It has a famous street and a famous mayor. The other day the question from a termite-proofing firm was: Who is president of the United States? It reminded me of the time I was asked who was president during the Civil War. Gleefully I answered Jeff Davis!

"Oh, no," said the caller in a fluster of dismay and a trace

of superiority. "His initials were A. L."

"Apparently you weren't briefed on history," I said. "During that time we had 2 presidents. You didn't say which one you wanted."

"Well, of course, I— well, I mean, you know, they didn't think of anybody but Lincoln. Oh! Now I've told you! Well, we'll give your home a free furnace inspection anyway, complete with our humidifier demonstration."

"No thanks," I said sweetly.

"Oh, but this is no ordinary inspection. Our products offer a whole new concept of clean air and—"

"Sorry, I live in a tree house."

In the early days this sort of thing was only mildly annoying. If you were caught at a task not too vexing to break away from you could have a little fun. One woman actually makes them hang up on her. When the pulpy prologue begins she lays down the phone and goes on about her business. When it's convenient she goes back to replace the receiver which is always buzzing by then. If she has a minute, though, she just listens and never makes a sound. The charming-chummy spiel deteriorates rapidly in silence to a couple of feeble "hellos?" She reports the unctious voice is reduced to muttering or an occasional snarl.

I discovered one case where a woman broke her leg rushing to catch what she thought was a long distance call from her husband. Painfully she crawled the last yards and pulled the receiver down by the cord. It was a solicitor for magazines. I cannot quote her comments.

Several people, including 1 man, mentioned burned food resulting from such calls. Cold dinners are a more recent grievance.

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By calling between 6 and 7 p.m. they know you're more likely to be at home. It hasn't occurred to them that interrupted dinners don't produce moods receptive to their aims.

There's no longer any humor in it. Frequency has increased from 3 or 4 calls a week to as many as 5 a day. New homeowners are a particularly harassed group. One told me of a caller who began brusquely: "I understand you just built a house. You'll be needing carpet."

"I've already selected my carpet and most of it is installed."

"That's impossible! I have a list of everyone who's in the market for carpet. According to my report you canceled the order you placed at X Company last week. You haven't had time to buy anywhere else!"

"I don't know where you got your information but I have my carpet" she said coolly.

There was some barely audible profanity and something about his list, then the loud demand: "Just where did you get that carpet, lady?"

She really was a lady. She informed him it was none of his business and bid him good day. Probably she shouldn't have engaged him at all. But most of us know how quickly we can become ensnared in a verbal exchange. And that's what they want. Some are more obnoxious than others but they've all been trained to get you talking. It's the telephone version of a foot in the door. There's also the possibility that the intruder really doesn't have anything to sell—until after he's robbed you. Don't give him any information.

If I begin to sound anti people-making-an-honest-living, it's because I am if they insist on doing it at the expense of my time, patience, and household tranquility. Since it isn't just a local

problem, moving won't help. The nuisance is national.

It was always my belief that public relations stood high in a firm's operational concerns— that a good image was important. So when will merchants learn that pushy peddlers, the hard sell, and the irritation process by telephone arouses resistance in customers? One man said: "I was about to contract for their lawn service until they bugged me in the middle of the Olympics."

The public seems to heartily hate the practice of preemptive pressure slithering into their privacy via that skinny little cord. So much so that their reactions can be heatedly opposite the goals of the promoter. Sad psychology. Organizations who use this tactic may have sales figures to support their theory that it pays, but I've yet to meet a woman or man who isn't ready to go into a tirade on the subject.

The telephone companies say they are powerless to stop it. The Better Business Bureau says that while they get numerous complaints, those who practice product hyping by phone are not breaking any regulation.

An unlisted number is one answer. But you miss old friends who would like to look you up. Folks use their phone book at Christmas card time, and in general you miss desirable calls from people you haven't given the number to yet. Why should you be further inconvenienced because of the hawkers? This applies to political campaigners, too. It is enough to be barraged by newspapers, junk mail, radio, TV and billboard bilge advising what to buy and whom to vote for. Please don't dial! That's the solution we prefer.

Now that people can own their own phones it will be even more difficult to create any kind of workable system to combat the problem. But what about color coded listings? I'd be willing to pay

cont.

more for, say, a red listing if the phone company would revoke the use privileges of anyone who calls my number to solicit business. If a firm is reported 3 times, disconnect them, put them on probation and fine them. Tranquility and poetic justice would be served, plus a better dinner if the person preparing it isn't interrupted and irritated by that same old ringing.

You can always peek out a window and refuse to answer the door bell if you see a stranger with a satchel. Now the geniuses of modern electronics have devised a telephone that will ask the caller's name, number and nature of the call before you make a move, relay it to your computer screen, and even give you the option of replying with an excuse on the caller's screen or simply not answering. But that's a long way off for the average household. I'd be satisfied with a separate and distinct ring for the party who wants to push his wares over the wires. Come to think of it, that's the one product I would buy by phone!