

Life with Phones

Earlier this month, Val and I ditched our telephone land line in favor of an upgraded mobile phone. Forsaking land lines is an ongoing trend helped by advances in mobile phone technology. But it didn't turn out as simple as it sounds. Nor is the technology all it's cracked up to be. After signing up, I excitedly took the phone home. By "smartphone" standards my phone was somewhat primitive. It had a touch screen and 4G (fourth generation for the uninitiated) but nothing like an iPhone or the latest Samsung. My phone cost only a fraction of those major brands. It didn't have more "apps" than there are people in Cincinnati. You can't ask it a question like "did we evolve from primates?" It worked great in the store. It worked great everywhere. That is, until I got home. It worked only sporadically, the signal was very weak and in the middle of a call there would be a "no service" message. To make a call I had to step out onto the driveway.

I returned to the store. They said call tech service. A scourge of modern life is having to call a toll free number to resolve any problem. When you have an issue with a computer, a reservation, an appliance, a box of cereal, a credit card purchase or just about anything, you have to call that dreaded number. Most call centers today are outside the United States. The Philippines and India dominate the industry. The Philippines is pulling ahead, even Indian companies are relocating some of its call centers to Manila. Hundreds of thousands of young people are employed in the Philippines, mostly around Manila. Virtually all the employees are college educated. By local standards the pay is good although the hours are lousy. Remember that there is a 12 hour time difference between Manila and Cincinnati.

After listening carefully since the menu options had changed and having punched the appropriate keys, I finally got a human. Oh, they ask you to key in your birth date. What the heck do they need your birth date for? The service technician at the other end sounded like an American, or perhaps a Filipino who had perfected an American accent. When this person couldn't resolve it, it was "escalated" to another technician. I've discovered through experience that there are several levels, the higher level requiring more technical skill. The next level technician had an accent but by this time I was in no mood to ask about how the weather was in Chennai or Manila. Or perhaps San Jose, Costa Rica, another call center location. I was on the phone for nearly an hour. It is time to reveal the name of my phone and service provider - Cincinnati Bell! You are told to call them from another phone, not the one you're having problems with. Isn't that clever? What if the cell is your only phone? The technician tells you to take the SIM card out then put it back. Phone is still not working properly.

"Sir, are you sure you installed the SIM card correctly?"

"Listen, they only go one way, it is idiot proof."

"Take the battery out then put it back in."

"Where's the battery?" (It turns out that the battery is inaccessible.)

"Let me put you on hold."

Long pause.

"Thank you for your patience. What is your location?"

I gave them our address.

"You are 1.21 miles from our tower."

"That's pretty close."

"You are near the maximum range of the tower."

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“What’s the range?”

“1.5 miles.”

“1.21 miles is well within 1.5 miles.”

“Yes, but for your 4G phone, you need to be closer. It would be better if your phone was upgraded to LTE (long term evolution).”

Long term evolution sounds Darwinian to me, like 10,000 years. It was around this point that I gave up. Besides, our pay as you go phone ran out of money, the first time it had ever happened. Thanks Cincinnati Bell.

Taking the technician’s tower range claim at face value, this means is that there has to be a cell phone tower every 3 miles to maintain 4G speeds. That didn’t sound plausible to me. We would need half a million cell phone towers. I checked and according to one source the range is closer to 20 miles although it is variable depending on the topography. The technician must have misread the cheat sheet. Nevertheless there are already 200,000 towers in the continental United States with more on the way. We have all kinds of “visual” pollution, like billboard pollution and light pollution. Pretty soon there will be cell phone tower pollution.

Having called my fair share of toll free numbers, I believe there should be a law that any company that sells merchandise or service to the public should require their executives to call their toll free number. That means just about every company in America and the world. I can’t think of too many exemptions, maybe defense contractors and those who only sell to other companies. The executives should also call on their own time, not during their working hours. I wonder how long it would take before the system becomes more efficient. Or maybe not.

I just got through writing a 5,000 word essay about my mother. I recalled growing up in early 1950’s Manila. Our home had the latest gadgets, a rotary phone, a 19 inch black & white television, large refrigerator, etc. The phone system was owned and operated by an umbrella government agency that was headed by my father. The system had what was then called a party line. That meant you shared the line with one or more neighbors. You picked up the phone hoping that no neighbor was on the line. If they were, you were out of luck. But everyone could listen in on anyone else’s conversation on the party line. If you wanted to make an urgent call, you would have to very politely ask the other party to hang up. So we have come a long way from the party line to having phone towers every 1.5 miles or maybe 20. A fundamental rule of economics is that demand leads to the creation of supply. In the case of cell phones, I believe this has been upended, the supply creates demand.

At the moment I am researching the procurement of a cheap land line. Perhaps we can try out VOIP (voice over internet protocol). Some systems are advertised as “free” after you make the initial equipment purchase. I am sure they have a toll free number I can call if there’s any problem.

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