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## Merenda's Marketing Tip: Unplug the Phone Answering System

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Don't get me wrong. I'm not a Luddite. I love technology. If it weren't for technology, I'd be the owner of a small marketing firm in southwest Florida serving local clients and hoping not to go out of business every summer when the tourists leave. Instead I have a national firm with clients all over the country.

That said, I urge my clients not to use technology to the detriment of human contact and customer service. The telephone is one key area where I believe this is taking place.

The automatic telephone answering system is an abomination that should be outlawed tomorrow. I have occasion to place phone calls to attorneys' offices around 25 times a week. Here are circumstances I run into regularly (and lest you think I'm exaggerating, let me tell you that these are much more the rule than the exception). Let's assume I am a prospective client.

An automated voice answers and tells me that this is the Smith Law Firm, and if I know my party's extension, I should enter it now. If I don't know it, I should consult the directory. I push the number for the directory and am urged to enter the first three letters of the person's name. First or last name? What if I don't *know* who I want? I am informed by the disembodied voice that I can hold the line (or press zero), and someone will help me. So I hold the line, and the next thing I hear is "You have reached Amy, the receptionist. I'm away from desk right now so please leave a message."

Gee, I don't want to leave a message for Amy, so I hang up and call back. This time I consult the directory and punch the number for the attorney. He or she never answers. I leave a voice mail.

I'm exhausted and frustrated and I've made two long distance telephone calls. (By the way, what is the number one complaint against attorneys nationwide? Not returning phone calls.)

You are in the relationship business. It is not possible to have a relationship with a disembodied voice in an automated system. Your clients hate it. Your prospective clients hate it. Everyone hates it. If you set out to deliberately annoy and offend everyone who contacts your office, you could not do a better job!

Did you know that research shows that what happens in the first 30 seconds influences client satisfaction more than every minute of customer service that follows?

Hire yourself a receptionist who loves people and has a warm and friendly phone personality. Call her (or him) the "Director of First Impressions." I promise you will make more in additional fees and new clients than the cost of his or her annual salary.

And remember, this all comes down from the top. If you give everyone in your office the

impression that the clients are a pain in the butt, and that your main goal in life is not to be bothered, I can guarantee you that every member of your staff will reflect this attitude. They will try to please you. You're the one who gives them their paychecks. Next time, try this: Hand them their pay envelope and tell them, "This is client money."

*Author Mark Merenda founded Smart Marketing in 1994. Since that time he has built it into one of the country's premier marketing firms for financial professionals. ElderLawAnswers members and site visitors receive a 33 percent discount on personalized marketing consulting. For more, [click here](#). Mr. Merenda can be contacted by telephone at (239) 403-7755 or by email: [mark@smartmarketingnow.com](mailto:mark@smartmarketingnow.com). The company's Web site is [www.smartmarketingnow.com](http://www.smartmarketingnow.com)*

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