

Testimony Of Linda Blase  
Ringling Off the Hook: Examining the Proliferation of Unwanted Calls

Special Committee On Aging  
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Chairman Collins, Ranking Member McCaskill and members of the committee:

Thank you for giving me the opportunity to tell a story shared by hundreds of thousands of American citizens. While I know you have many more weighty issues to consider, there are few that affect as many of us on a daily basis as the barrage of robocalls that constantly interrupt our lives.

I have been called by the FBI because my name “popped up” in a drug investigation.

I have been called by the IRS, presumably wanting me to transfer funds to pay back taxes and penalties.

I have been called by a legitimate theater company that wanted to sell me something that had nothing to do with theater tickets.

Of course none of these calls came from those organizations. All were fraudulent, with spoofed names and numbers, and two of the three were scammers trying to get into my bank account.

In the first case, the caller ID actually displayed “FBI.” So I answered. It took about 15 seconds for me to tell the caller that he was a fraud, and hang up. Then, just in case it MIGHT have been a legitimate (though clearly mistaken!) call, I checked the area code and discovered it was from the Washington, DC area. What if I had just hung up on the FBI? So I called the local (Dallas) branch of the FBI. The person I spoke to confirmed that it was a scam and told me I had done exactly the right thing when I hung up on the caller.

There was no doubt about the fraudulent nature of the IRS call - the caller ID read UNKNOWN NAME. (!) I didn't answer the call, but it went to voice mail, and of course, the robotic computer voice started talking right through my outgoing message. So all I heard was “Department number...” and a phone number. I called it. As soon as I heard “IRS” I hung up, and probably said something not very nice before I did so.

These are just a few examples of the endless nuisance calls I have received for years. I sometimes get as many as six of these calls per day; some of them are repeated multiple times. I get far more junk calls on my home phone than legitimate calls from people I actually want to speak to. Between May 5 and June 5, I had only 6 days without one of those calls. And during that time, I received 51 nuisance calls, plus 6 more that were blocked, 5 charity calls, 11 legitimate calls, and one wrong number. So 57 out of 74 were unsolicited sales or scam calls, not counting calls from charities.

When the National Do Not Call list was established, I registered my phone number.

It soon became clear that it made no difference to these people. All they had to do was change a number, or spoof one, to hide their identities and evade prosecution (if anyone was even willing to invest the time and energy required to prosecute). And when it became really easy to just feed a list of numbers into a computer and have the computer dial them repeatedly, it got even worse.

And since TOLL FREE CALLERS (800 and 888 numbers, for example) are not public record, telemarketers can use those numbers to hide their identities.

So there are many ways these robocallers can invade our homes incessantly, and with impunity, day in and day out.

Often the recorded message will ask you to “Press 1” to speak to a customer service agent. If you press 1 to ask the “agent” to take your number off their call list, they may call you obscene names before they quickly hang up on you. And then your number may go onto a list of consumers who are willing to answer unfamiliar numbers, and that list will be sold and resold many times, so a multitude of scammers can add your number to their lists.

Sometimes they offer you the option to “Press 2” to be taken off their list. You do so. Then you find that all you have done is let the computer know it has reached a working number, which it will continue to call, over and over.

So you are left with the choice of a quick pick-up and hang-up, without ever saying a word, or not answering, giving the call a chance to go to voice mail, where you have to spend the time to clear it out. You can report the calls to the FCC through a time-consuming online form, which feels like sending information into a black hole, or you can go to a consumer-driven site that collects complaints from others who are also tearing their hair out over these calls. At least that way you can get more information about the offending number from other consumers.

If I could charge for the time and energy I spend answering or following through on these calls, I could probably move into a higher tax bracket.

So when Consumers Union and the AARP decided to bring the enormity of the problem to the attention of the FCC, and to the Congress, I jumped at the chance to participate in a volunteer call blocker test for Consumers Union.

I found that while call blockers are useful, their effectiveness is limited, and to be fully functional may require some complicated programming.

The one I tested will only block a call straight out of the box if it comes in with no telephone number attached. That means that only calls that register as ANONYMOUS, PRIVATE CALLER, OUT OF AREA, or UNKNOWN showing no phone number will be blocked without additional programming. All of the nuisance calls that come in with a minimum 7-digit number will ring through. Once a call comes in, you can mark its number to be blocked in the future. But since the robocallers can (and frequently do) change their numbers, this only works until the number changes. The only consistent number in the whole process is the home phone number. So unless we change our phone numbers on a regular basis, which is impractical to say the least, or we disconnect our home phones and use only cell phones, we are largely at the mercy of the robocallers. And we all know the plague has already begun to creep onto our mobile devices and it's only a matter of time until they are inundated as well.

The blocker I tested does allow for more complicated programming options, such as blocking entire area codes or specific numbers you choose in addition to the incoming calls you have marked to block (up to 80 numbers or area codes). But then you have to “invite” the numbers of friends who live in the blocked area codes, to prevent them from being blocked. So it can get pretty complicated (and time-

consuming) very quickly. And as I age, my brain is looking for more simplicity, not more complication.

It would be so much simpler if the phone companies could block robocalls from their telemarketing clients to all numbers on the Do Not Call List and to customers who opt-in to use free call-blocking services offered by the phone carriers.

If the government is going to trust the phone companies to collect and safeguard all that metadata for the NSA, and to retrieve the information needed to identify those deemed actionable threats to our national security (under court order of course), I would assume the phone companies also have the ability to trace the people who defy the Do Not Call List. Why don't they? And why are the telemarketers not prosecuted for their blatant disregard of that registry?

If you think I'm ticked off now, just wait until I'm lying in the hospital with a broken hip after running to the phone and tripping over the thing I absent-mindedly left in the middle of the floor, just so that Rachel from Credit Services could pressure me to transfer all my credit card balances to her "low interest" (but fee-laden) credit card account.

We are reaching the point where freedom of speech is bumping up against a citizen's right to privacy. As far as I am concerned, these calls are uninvited intrusions into my home. Why should telemarketers be exempt from regulations similar to the requirement in many communities for door-to-door salespersons to skip homes with a "NO SOLICITORS" sign posted near the door?

We need a similar mechanism for these unwanted phone calls. The National Do Not Call Registry was supposed to do this, but it has become clear that the technology used by the scammers and telemarketers has made enforcement nearly impossible. I believe the telephone companies have the ability to do more in this area and that they should do so.

It is time for us all to take a good look at this issue and work together to stop, or at least sharply limit, the occurrence of such unwanted and often fraudulent calls.