



David Heard, president of Profit-Tell International, poses in the booth his company uses to make recorded messages that phone callers hear when put on hold by companies. RICHARD A. CHAPMAN / SUN-TIMES

Company finds niche between hanging on and hanging up

BY HOWARD WOLINSKY
Business Reporter

It's a three-second race. It's the difference between winning and losing a sale, holding onto or alienating a customer.

Research has shown that the average "on-hold" time we face before making first contact with a warm body when calling a company is 43 seconds. But by the time 40 seconds have elapsed, 90 percent of callers have already hung up.

In those three seconds, potential new customers and long-time customers often slam the phone down in frustration, costing companies good will and sales.

"Dead air can be disastrous," said David Heard, 53, president and founder of Profit-Tell International, a 10-year-old on-air advertising company. "People do not want to wait. They don't want to be bored. They don't want to be neglected."

Hinsdale-based Profit-Tell is among a smattering of companies around the country that specialize in developing on-hold ads and marketing strategies that persuade customers to hang in there instead of hanging up.

Heard said the North American Telecommunications Association reports that 90 percent of new prospects will hang up within the first 40 seconds of being on hold when they hear nothing but silence. "They stay on 30 seconds longer with music. But if they receive information, they stay on the line for up to three minutes longer," he said.

Until two years ago, Augustino's Rock and Roll Deli in Carol Stream didn't even have an answering machine to catch lunchtime callers

who wanted to order ahead for sub sandwiches, pasta or turkey on rye hold the mayo. Callers couldn't even find out the deli's hours, said Cathy Morelli, self-proclaimed "marketing genius" for her family's deli.

She hired Profit-Tell to hook the callers with entertaining and informative messages about the 25-year-old business as order takers work to catch up. The ads tell amusing stories, sometimes with voices imitating well-known celebrities, at the same time plugging products

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and services, such as the fact that the deli sells its own bottled dressing and pasta sauce and has catering, that customers might not know about, she said.

Take "The Andy Griffith Show" take-off—in keeping with Augustino's nostalgia theme—in which the whistled theme from the TV show comes on and a voice sounding like Deputy Barney Fife says, "Don't worry, we haven't gone fishing. We're just kinda' busy doing business. Somebody'll be right with ya'...Hey Andy, wait up!"

Morelli said on-hold advertising has paid off: "Our phone orders have doubled. In the past, maybe 25 percent of our orders came over the phone. Now it's more like 40 to 50 percent."

Morelli said customers talk to the staff about the ads and even let them know when they're getting tired of the messages.

Heard said he now has several thousand customers in the Chicago area alone, from one-man plumbing shops and landscapers to Humana Health Care, Culligan, Harrah's and Jack Binion Horseshoe casinos, Mario Tricoci Salons of Chicago and State Farm Insurance.

Profit-Tell, which has 15 staffers, including full-time voice talents and ad copywriters, and three recording studios, produces its own ad copy and recordings. Profit-Tell also produces audio messages for Web sites and overhead announcements for the casinos.

Heard said his clients pay \$3 to \$4 a day for the recordings and special digital equipment.

Heard would not disclose his revenues, but said they have doubled each year over recent years. He is aiming for a national presence by selling Profit-Tell franchises, at about \$19,500, to go with existing franchises in Chicago; Cleveland; San Francisco; Boulder, Colo., and Northern Virginia/Washington, D.C. His goal is to have 250 franchises on board by 2005.

Franchises serve areas with a minimum population of 250,000, and some large areas, such as Chicago, will have multiple operations. He said the franchises sell the service while his office produces the copy and recordings.