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Federal Communications Commission
Office of Secretary

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October 15, 1997
Mr. Meryl S. Icove
Director, Disabilities Issues Task Force
2033 M Street, NW
Washington, DC 20544

Subject: AITCS's (Automated Interactive Tele-Communications Systems)

Dear Mr. Icove

I had been complaining about the poor quality and inaccessibility of the subject re voice menus for quite a while. Then last April I was instrumental in obtaining 346 signatures on a petition that asked for the universal out (press "0" if you wish to speak to a human) espoused by SHHH, Inc and others. The petition and requests I have made to everyone I have contacted has also asked that where universal outs are not required or put in place for any reason then such AITCS's should be required to have an option whereby the messages on the menu are spoken at least 50 percent slower

It is especially believed the request to have a second set of slow messages is a reasonable one and is readily achievable. This is so obvious to me but I will elaborate just in case some explanation is appropriate. To have a second set of slow messages would be simply to have the person speaking the original set to repeat them much slower just as if he/she is speaking other menu choices. While this requires the AITCS's to overall take longer it should be kept in mind that once recorded, there will be no more time involved, just as for the saved time in having an AITCS,s in the first place. I would guess that the original messages will have been in writing for the person to read from so as to allow the voiced second messages to be identical.

To emphasize the problems involved with the AITCS technology I call your attention to a sentence in a recent publication dealing with the subject: "most people with some degree of hearing loss find telephone conversations are difficult, but technology can make it easier." The article was of course referring to assistive listening devices. However another technology AITCS's is robbing us of the benefits of ALD's. This is just not fair in addition to actually making accessibility impossible or nearly so.

To hopefully have your organization be more concerned about the problems involved, the following quote from a Robert Reno article who writes for Newsday: "The deregulated telecommunications world has only begun to take form, and it is still a crapshoot whether it astonishes us with the benefits of competition more than it bewilders us with life-complicating incomprehensibility and revenue-enhancing nonsense." Please keep in mind that Mr. Reno is talking to the general public, whereas the hard of hearing are finding the AITCS.s more than bewildering.

As a result of my efforts I can furnish other articles that are concerned about the comprehensibility of voice menus.

I have found it difficult to learn where I can best direct my efforts to try to find a "listening" ear concerning the issues that AITCS's presents, having tried the Access Board and the ADA as well as our Ohio Consumers Counsel and the Public Utilities Commission of Ohio. As a result of a two page "complaint" (and copies of various documents) sent to the Department of Justice I have received the following response.

"The Disability Rights Section of the Civil Rights Division of the Department of Justice received your correspondence. We appreciate your interest in writing to us to express your views."

I did hope to receive a more helpful and or explanatory letter of response as to why it may be unreasonable to make the universal out a requirement for organizations having 50 or 100 employees, and to require in every case the second option for slow voices and or some combination of the two.

Please respond to this request in meaningful as possible.

No. of Copies rec'd 2
List A B C D E

September 10, 1994

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Leo A. LaPointe". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial "L".

Leo A. LaPointe

Enclosures: Copy of Debra Kendrick's news article published by Columbus Dispatch Printing Co.

cc: by E-mail to Donna Sorkin, Director of SHHH, Inc who furnished your name as one to contact with the FCC.

9/21/91

For assistance, please punch 1: We'd love to

A friend regaled a whole table full of us last week with her tales of attempts to get information from an automated 800 telephone number to help smokers quit. It was all so fast, she said, she didn't know if she pressed 1 or 2, or whether she was being mailed information or a lifetime supply of patches.

We all could identify with the moment.

I spent hours on the phone just before Labor Day, begging, pleading, cajoling an airlines reservationist to help change my flight. I had purchased my ticket through an automated interactive telephone communications system, and had selected the wrong day for departure. "Press 1 for Friday, 2 for Saturday" the system prompted. I didn't realize my error until the confirmation was announced.



**DEBORAH
KENDRICK**

There was no option for contacting a human being, and only the most resourceful traveler would try every phone number listed anywhere until tracking down a real person being capable of making the change.

Any of us who use voice menu systems for banking, airline reservations, credit-card information or a host of other services, probably knows at least one other person who can't seem to manage them. Maybe it's an elderly person or a family member with a developmental disability. For millions of people who are deaf or hard of hearing, interactive phone systems are blatant examples of exclusion.

Take Paul Stein of Santa Clara, Calif. All he wanted to do was straighten out a bit of credit confusion with Equifax Information Systems Corp., a credit reporting company, but he couldn't understand what the soft female voice on the automated system was saying. So he called back with a relay service — a telephone service available in every state that acts as a link between a spoken conversation on one end of the phone line and a person typing on a TTY (text teletypewriter for the deaf) at the other.

Nothing doing. The relay typist couldn't keep up with the automated message and transmit the information. And again, there was no option for bailing out and contacting a live representative.

Leo LaPointe, a Worthington retiree who has a hearing disability, has been working hard to find someone who can enforce equal accessibility to automated systems for deaf and hard-of-hearing people. He has written to the Department of Justice, the Public Utilities Commission of Ohio, the National Association of the Deaf Law Center; a solution so far, no one has rushed forward with

All LaPointe and others with hearing disabilities want businesses to do is to offer what is called "universal out" (Press 0 for a live human being), or a means for slowing the automated system's voice. If options were not spoken so rapidly, callers with hearing difficulties would have a better shot at understanding the recordings, and relay operators wouldn't be so likely to get lost in the fast shuffle.

Paul Stein's problem — his credit was mixed up with someone else's of the same name — should have been simple enough to solve. After several weeks, it is still only partially unraveled because Stein can't communicate with the company.

"A company the size of Equifax, 18,000 employees, can certainly find the money to make communication more accessible to someone like me," Stein said. "The problem isn't finding the money or the technology. The problem is that the understanding just isn't there on the part of the management."

I called Equifax myself to hear that automated system. The voice is soft and high-pitched, the speech rapid, and it was clear to me that many people — with hearing disabilities or without — will probably need an alternative for clear communication. Wouldn't it be lovely if companies like Equifax decided there was no need for outside pressure to add slower speech or the universal out of pressing 0 for a live operator?

Wouldn't it be just the clearest and most powerful sort of message if this company and others simply picked up the ball and ran with it — and just plain did the right thing?

Check it out for yourself at 800-865-1111. But don't try to slow the voice down or turn it up. And don't press 0 to leave your opinion with a human employee. There's no one there.

Deborah Kendrick is a Cincinnati writer and advocate for people with disabilities. Her e-mail address is 71340.473@compuserve.com

