

Telephone solicitors

WHO'S MAKING THOSE CALLS?

by Jim Jerving

"Good evening, Mrs. Jenkins?"
"Yes?"
"The reason I'm calling, Mrs. Jenkins, is to find out how many tickets you would like for the annual labor ball."

Sound familiar? An estimated 12 million of these "junk" telephone calls are made daily to sell everything from aluminum siding to encyclopedias.

"Nom de phone"—A few years ago, I worked as a phoneman for a business that sold tickets to various balls. The firm was based in San Diego, a difficult place to find a job in 1975, as it is today.

But there were always want ads for telephone solicitors. One such ad claimed, "Make \$250-\$350 a week, pros only." A phone number and the name Mike Lewis were given.

Mike Lewis turned out to be a "nom de phone" for the boss, Kenny. As I was to learn, most phonemen use another name, but more for convenience than outright deception.

And phoneman is the correct name; most phonerooms are all-male preserves. For the four months that I worked for the firm, not one female was hired.

If a woman called for a job, Kenny would tell her the position had just been filled; then he'd add, "Oh, by the way, there's another ad from a partner of mine, Ted Hustings, and he just told me all of his positions are filled, too."

Ted Hustings was yet another phony name for Kenny, who found it



necessary to run two separate ads with two different names.

Bullyboy tactics—Unlike other forms of selling, the phone sale depends totally on one's voice; no flashy clothes or frozen smiles here. Sales went slowly at first. Kenny maintained that my voice was too educated; he suggested a "just folks" approach. In practice, though, the phonemen with the intimidating voices made the most money.

One of the more successful voices belonged to a bizarre character by the name of Little Leonard. If it was the labor ball, he would start the pitch by saying he was down at the labor hall talking with "some of the boys." Next came the assuring tones of "I know you want to keep up this good feeling with the boys."

If the customer ran a business that depended on labor, trouble was implied: "The boys told me that you would be good for a few tickets, and we both know how important labor is to us."

With his bullyboy tactics, Little Leonard came across as a brute who lunched on Brillo pads. Those receiving his pitch would have found a different man in person. Slight of

build with the wayward look of an underfed teenager, Little Leonard compounded his unlikely appearance by wearing over-sized Bermuda shorts and large black-framed glasses.

Money in the pocket—Why didn't these customers hang up when Little Leonard gave his tough guy pitch? The simple truth is that a surprising number of people just can't say no to a sales pitch.

And every good phoneman knows that if you catch these people at the right time, it's money in the pocket.

My co-workers would live for Fridays and their weekly paychecks. Then off to the racetrack at nearby Tijuana or Del Mar.

Monday arrived, and back they came, broke and suffering from hangovers. They seemed interested in two things, gambling and drinking.

A drowning man—One of the phonemen approached gambling with a religious fervor; he would talk of nothing else. Unfortunately, this was not matched by an ability to make horseracing a paying venture.

Richard joined the night crew about a month after me. A tall, bony man, he wore ill-fitting clothes that looked skid row, even by phonerom standards.

Richard lived a few blocks from the phonerom. Actually, his "apartment" consisted of two dark basement rooms with concrete floors and a mattress. If one's domicile offers an inner view to the psyche, Richard was a drowning man, and the phonerom was the last in a series of lifelines.

Then Richard stopped showing up for work. According to Kenny, detectives had been around asking questions. It seemed Richard was the target of a police investigation into gambling. He was eventually charged with running bets to the Tijuana racetrack.

Many Richards came and went in this phonerom, but the one most remembered worked several years before my time. He worked for two years, living the entire time in his station wagon with two dogs.

When he first applied for the job he was asked his address. When he replied "My car," Kenny merely asked "Front seat or back?"

Moving on—My career as a phoneman ended one night after calling a customer to sell a few tickets. The woman listened a little too patiently as I went through my weary litany of reasons to buy, then suddenly stopped me and shouted into the phone, "How can you do a job like this? I'd rather be on welfare than bother people over the phone."

Little Leonard would have had an answer, but I didn't. I put down the receiver, walked out, and didn't come back.

Written by Jim Jerving, a reformed phoneman, and now a credit union co-worker.

There oughta be a law

If Little Leonard calls you, there are three things you can do:

1. Put him on hold and go for a walk.
2. Sit back and listen to the benefits of all-weather siding or Florida real estate.
3. Or do something about it. Representative Les Aspin of Wisconsin has introduced a bill (HR 9505) prohibiting unsolicited commercial telephone calls to persons who have indicated they don't want such calls.

Contact your U.S. congressmen and tell them how you feel about the bill.