

The Oasis Centre - Cornwall

Registered Charity Number 1139355, founded to serve the communities in the parishes of St Columb Major, St Mawgan-in-Pydar, St Eval and St Ervan



Looking Out for Automated Calls

Number 38 in a series of notes on important issues.

Most of us are familiar with the unsolicited, unwelcome telephone call that comes in when you are busy cooking, painting the bedroom or have just settled down to watch your favourite television programme. Historically, it was the salesman (or woman) trying to persuade you to buy double glazing, a holiday in the sun or perhaps insurance cover that you do not need. We can reduce the number of these calls by registering with the free Telephone Preference Service — <https://www.tpsonline.org.uk/tps/index.html>.

More recently, we have been made aware that criminals, usually fraudsters, can be behind these calls. Reputable businesses know that they are not allowed to call if your number is on the Telephone Preference Service list. Criminals do not suffer from the same inhibition, nor do callers from overseas. And so, these calls still come in, but they are even more annoying and can be dangerous.

The police tell us that the making of telephone calls can now be automated. A computer program will generate random telephone numbers and will then dial them – ten numbers at a time. The program then handles the responses it receives before any human being becomes involved. The ‘handshake’ received from another computer or an old-fashioned telex or fax machine is recognised and the call terminated. Only human responses are passed on to the operators at the call centre.

Sometimes we receive a ‘silent’ call. There is nobody on the other end of the line when we respond. That can happen when the automated dialling equipment receives too many results and all its human operators in the call centre are busy dealing with other calls. To stop this, we can, for a fee, use a service that requires the caller to give some form of personal identification. Only a call with a human being on the other end of the line will be put through.

Criminals have the equipment that enables them to make automated calls. The police tell us how they use it. If a dialled number produces a ringing tone, the computer stores it on a database of ‘live’ numbers. If someone answers the automated call, their number is moved to a database of ‘answered’ calls. If that person then ‘engages’ in any way, their number is moved to a third database. They are a likely target.

These lists of numbers can be used by the criminals and sold to other criminals. The third list is the most valuable of course. If you are listed as an ‘engager’, you will get more such calls. The advice is that, when you pick up a phone, the only thing you say is ‘hello’. Let the person on the other end do the talking. If you are not interested, simply put the phone down. It is not rude – you did not ask them to call.

Jeremy Simmonds, Chair, The Oasis Centre - Cornwall