Automatic Answering:
The Benefits Are There

Now, iaWCC Can Communicate
with Its Members 24 Hours a Day

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It takes more than an office telephone or two, essential as that basic communication instrument is, to serve adequately the communications needs of an international trade or professional association.

For one thing, there is the difference in time zones. If the office is in Washington, D.C., as is that of the international association of Wall and Ceiling Contractors, at closing time of 5 PM it's just 2 PM, Pacific time. Outside the continental boundaries, the time zone differences can be greater, in either direction.

Keeps Lines Open

I believe that an association like ours owes it to the members to keep its lines of communication open, around the clock if economically practical, and on weekends. We get a good many calls evenings and on weekends from our members as well as business associates, and it is our responsibility to see that they are answered.

There are even economic advantages to the association in providing extended communications service. In one case, a manufacturer planning to exhibit at a forthcoming trade show called the office in Washington after hours and reserved two booths, representing an additional return of $1,500 to the association for that show. That more than paid for the cost of the equipment that we had acquired for that purpose.

There is no need for a telephone answering provision in the daytime at our Washington offices. Although the organization numbers only approximately 450 members, its membership rolls include almost all of the large contractors of the industry, some grossing up to $60 million a year. All this requires a staff of five individuals including myself to assure that someone is always available to answer the telephone, except under a rare combination of circumstances.

Avoids Inconsistency

For evening and weekend answering, we employed at first the services of a public switchboard, or answering agency. This was intermittently satisfactory as when they assigned an operator who learned what the office needed to know from a caller and who answered in a pleasant voice. However, the next time we were just as likely to draw an operator who had had a bad night before, and projected an unpleasant telephone personality. In addition, when the switchboard was busy, it often took too long to answer, causing hang-ups.

In July, 1974, the association acquired a machine called a "Code-a-phone" to answer the telephone automatically and to receive messages in return, whenever there was no one available at the office to answer. It also has a number of remote command capabilities that extend its value to us greatly.

To answer the telephone, we can select one of three announcement tape decks, each with a duration of about 24 seconds. We dictate one standard message onto one of the tapes for the evening, a second tape for weekend answering, and the third for special occasions. With this, the only time a new message must be dictated is for the special occasion.

The message receiving tape has a capacity of about 25 minutes and is voice-controlled. This means that as long as the caller continues to speak without pausing longer

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than about 10 seconds, the machine will continue to receive him. The user does have the option to limit the total length of the called-in message to 30 or 60 seconds but I use it without either limitation. I don’t want a caller to be cut off in mid-sentence, which can happen.

The machine can also be controlled remotely from any outside telephone station, local or long distance, by means of a pocket-size battery-activated accessory. By holding it against the mouthpiece of the telephone and depressing certain buttons, I can cause the accessory to transmit over the telephone lines coded tone signals of differing frequencies. These will cause the machine to either (1) rewind and play back all messages received, (2) erase all messages accumulated, or (3) change the announcement that answers the telephone, and play it back once for review.

Retrieval Feature

All remote command facilities are useful to me, I have found. I must travel a good deal, requiring me to be absent approximately 30% of the time. If I change my itinerary, it can be important that I change the announcement remotely, which I can also do by long distance. And of course, it is always desirable that I be able to retrieve the messages from outside the office, while on a trip, or even at home without having to return to the office, on an evening or a weekend. The necessity for retrieving such messages depends on the circumstances, of course. If labor negotiations are in progress, for example, it may be very important that I keep on top of the situation both during and after office hours.

Many callers leave a good deal of detailed information. A contractor involved in a labor dispute may call and tell in detail just what the problem is all about. This saves the return call, usually a long distance one, and helps me to know exactly what I must do to respond to the situation.

The ability to erase messages remotely can also be important when a number have accumulated and the office is not attended. During one period, which happened to coincide with a convention, the office was unstaffed for about a week. It was then very helpful to be able to erase my messages once a day, so I did not have to listen through them repeatedly. It also enabled the machine to accommodate all messages received instead of loading the tape as it would have otherwise.

The importance of the machine to our operations can be gauged by the fact that it receives five to six messages on a typical night, and 20 to 25 on a typical weekend. And the “Code-a-phone” more than paid for its cost of acquisition when it received the order for two booths by an exhibitor, not long after we put the machine into service.

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