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Escape From Automated-Phone Hell

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- Letters & Live Talk
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- Multimedia
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- Sports
- Tech / Science
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- Health
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By **Linda Stern**
Newsweek

May 17 issue - "Press 3 if you feel like using the F word." We're not there yet, but a University of Southern California professor is working on a business-oriented voice-mail system that will identify irate callers and move them to human operators. Shrikanth Narayanan, who runs a speech-analysis and voice-interpretation lab at USC, developed software that detects the emotional content of speech.

When consumers get particularly peeved at those "please say service or sales" prompts, the system is supposed to pick up that frustration and transfer them to a live operator before they give up. His system monitors the words consumers use (cursing, for example), their speech patterns (repeating themselves) and the pitch and sound of their voice.

The big risk in Narayanan's software, which he expects to market within two years, is that wily consumers will game the system. Instead of having an incentive to behave themselves, they'll figure out they should shriek if they want an operator faster. "Certainly that will be the game to play," Narayanan concedes. But not all "angries" would get an operator: other systems will be set up to improve automated responses to these customers without rewarding them, he says.

Perhaps Narayanan's next project will be voice mail that soothes callers frustrations automatically... or disciplines them: "Press 7 if you need us to find you and wash your mouth out with soap."

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