

You're a what?

Telemarketer

by Matthew Mariani

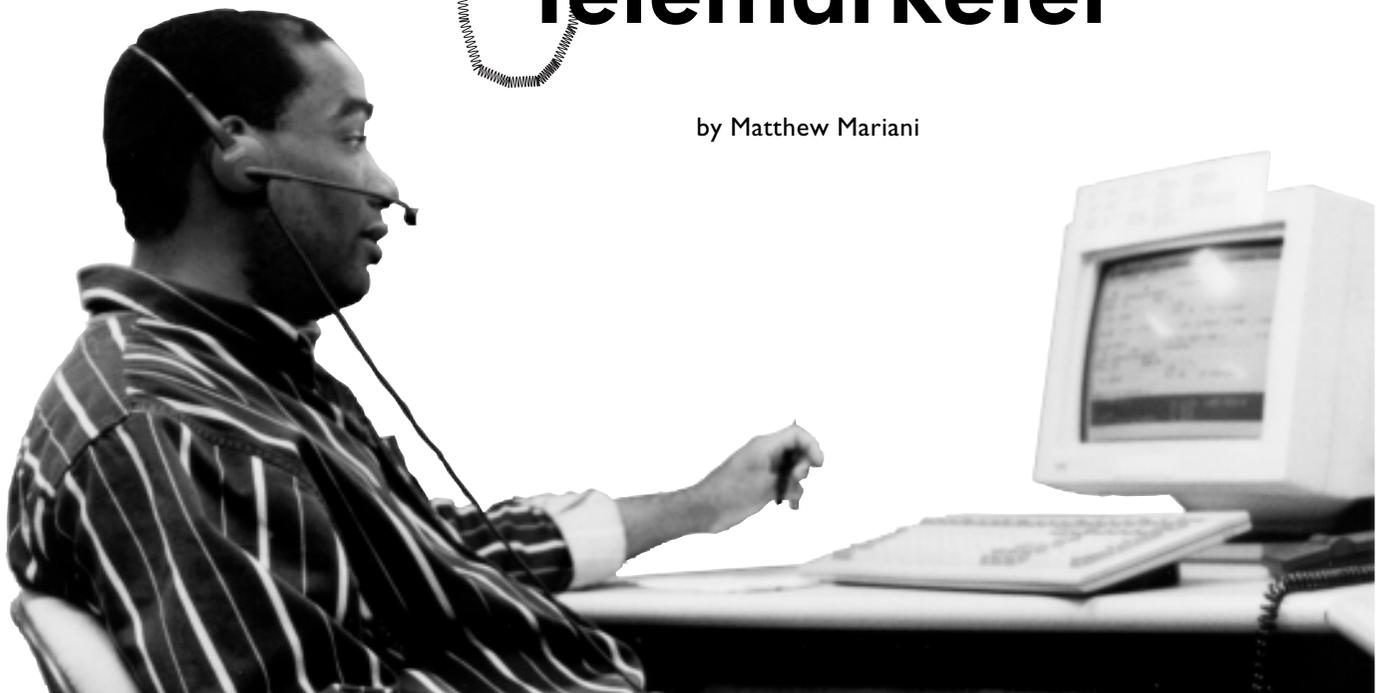


Photo courtesy of the Martin Agency

During the day, Michael Simpson works as a telemarketer, selling products to businesses by phone. At night, he earns a second paycheck playing violin. His two callings form a curious counterpoint.

By day, he works at the Martin Call Center, a teleservices firm in Richmond, Virginia. He sells subscriptions to a major business publication. "I prefer music," he says, "but I've been successful in sales. I know I can sell."

Simpson performs at a workstation in a semicircular cubicle, or pod, along with three to five telemarketing colleagues. He orchestrates sales using

a computer, a phone line, an automated dialing system, and an electronic list of prospective customers and phone numbers. His prospects include office managers, small business owners, and other financially savvy people.

Whether he's performing in a telemarketing pod or an orchestra pit, Simpson strives to captivate an audience. When someone answers his call, Simpson has only seconds to make his official overture. He introduces himself and explains the purpose of his call in a professional, upbeat tone. Reading from an approved sales script, he begins to establish a rapport with his audience of one.

"There are questions you can ask to generate and keep interest," Simpson says. "I might ask if they've ever read or heard of the publication to get them involved in a conversation." Often, his audience has read the publication, so Simpson will segue with a query about the value they found in it.

Although Simpson must memorize a musical score for some of his violin recitals, he does not need to take such careful note of his sales script. He often improvises, choosing variations to suit the audience. "I try to customize my presentation so people feel like I'm just talking to them instead of reading from a script," he says.

As Simpson speaks, voices of other telemarketers accompany him indis-

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tinctly in the background. But he must focus on his own performance. It's not easy for telemarketers to win over an audience and make a sale. Simpson's business customers have work to do, deals to make, and deadlines to meet. These busy people often see Simpson as a distraction from work, so he must fine tune his pitch to the needs of each individual.

"If they say they're not interested," says Simpson, "I try to figure out why, so I can present the product in a way that shows how it would meet individual needs." Potential customers often object, saying they don't have time—either to talk to a telemarketer or to read the publication even if they were to receive it. Simpson must answer their objections. He explains how the product provides important information that will increase their effectiveness, saving them time in the long run.

But more often than not, even a virtuoso sales performance leads to no sale. Some potential customers react rudely to Simpson's persistence by making nasty comments and hanging up. Simpson must maintain his composure and move on. "You can't let a string of no sales or hangups bother you," Simpson says. "You just focus on the next call being successful."

Simpson's sales manager supervises the efforts of telemarketers on the sales floor and helps keep morale high. When telemarketers make a sale, they summon the sales manager, who gets on the line to confirm necessary details. The manager announces the sale after completing the call, and the other telemarketers applaud—or offer a congratulatory wave if they are on the line with another customer. "I thought this would be distracting

when I first started the job, but actually, it's not," Simpson says. "It gives everyone a boost."

Telemarketing offers many opportunities for part-time and temporary work, as well as full-time employment. Simpson began working at the call center in February 1998 to supplement his music earnings. He officially works for a temporary help firm that supplies telemarketing workers as needed for the center. In the future, he plans to telemarket for 30 to 35 hours per week during the summer months—slow season for his musical career—and decrease his hours when his musical pursuits pick up in the fall.

Many companies hire telemarketers for in-house call centers. These workers sell the services or products produced by their employers. Other telemarketers, like Simpson, work at independent call centers, which sell on behalf of other companies for a fee.

In 1996, almost 304,000 Americans worked in telemarketing or related jobs, according to data from a BLS survey. But the survey represents only a portion of all telemarketers because it narrowly defines the occupation. Many more workers in other sales occupations sell by phone.

The survey showed a median wage of \$7.77 per hour for workers in the telemarketing category in 1996. This hourly wage includes commissions and incentives based on sales, a major part of earnings for many telemarketers.

Whereas playing a violin concerto takes years of prior practice, telemarketers usually need only a few days of on-the-job training before making their first live telephone sales performance. The length of training for telemarketers depends on the number and type of products being sold.

Like all new workers at the Martin Call Center, Simpson had 3 days of training. He learned about phone sales techniques, telemarketing laws and guidelines, and the product he would be selling. He also listened in on live calls initiated by experienced telemarketers. Then he made practice calls, with another worker playing the role of the customer.

Simpson has had more formal education and training than the average telemarketer. Many firms prefer, but do not require, a high school diploma for telemarketing work. Some employers may find college education desirable, but most do not require a college degree; it often depends on the products sold. Simpson has a bachelor's degree in music education and completed advanced sales training before working at the call center.

Simpson also had years of previous sales and musical experience. He taught music in public and private schools for 13 years. While working for an adult education school, he moved into sales and marketing when he started promoting the school to new students. He spent 3 years in his next job, selling memberships for the local chamber of commerce. A couple of years ago, he opened his own music studio, where he offers private instruction in violin. He has played violin with the Richmond Classical Players and the Lynchburg and Richmond Symphonies.

After selling subscriptions all day, Simpson pulls off his telephone headset and reaches for his violin case—letting go of one performance and turning his thoughts to another.

