

Business Owners; Beware

My shop has taken some very odd phone calls the last month or so. So odd in fact I decided to do some research to find out if this was some kind of new Internet scam. If you are a business owner you need to know this information.

The relay service for the deaf was originally designed for hearing impaired people so that they would have a method of communicating across the phone system. The hearing impaired can use special TTY equipment or simply log on to an Internet page to type their communications. A special operator then dials the phone number and translates the typed communication. I have helped many hearing impaired customers with their computer problems using this system so I am very familiar with how it works.

Recently I have received several phone calls over the relay system that just didn't add up. All of the callers asked questions about my computer systems and then attempt to place an order for multiple systems. It is not our practice to take credit cards over the phone and then ship computer systems out of state so we politely turned these orders down. However, after the third call in less than two months I began to get suspicious of these calls.

During the last call I tried to talk with the operator to see if she knew where this call was coming from and if she had seen an increase in these types of odd calls. She of course would not comment on any questions that I asked so after hanging up I decided to do some research on my own.

The relay system is actually funded through a tax that is paid on each long distance minute sold through the phone companies. In 2002 several companies including MCI and AT&T began offering IP relay services. (This is how I tie this article to computer technology.) This allowed the hearing impaired to log on to any Internet connected computer and "chat" with anyone in the world using the relay service. This allowed folks to communicate with others without having to lug their expensive TTY equipment around. This service is free to anyone who uses it; the phone companies get paid out of the special fund that I talked about earlier. Unfortunately this fund is running low on money and I think I know why.

AT&T and MCI both officially say that fraud across the system is limited to less than 1% of the calls. I found that MSNBC reported on this problem recently and they located several operators that have stated that over half the calls they take seem to have fraudulent activity associated with them. These numbers better coincide with my own experiences. I have taken 4 relay calls in the past two months, three of which were obvious fraud.

This kind of abuse of the system is going to do two things. First, many business may stop taking relay calls altogether, which would be a shame for those who truly need this service. Second, the heavier than expected load on the relay system will put it into financial ruin, forcing heavier taxes on everybody's long distance bills. The relay companies have to find a way to limit this fraud for the sake of small business owners and the hearing impaired.

If you have computer related questions that need to be answered by computer professionals, be sure to talk with the experts at Computer Depot. Call 947-0749 and ask to speak with Thomas, Roger, or Scott so that you can get back on the right track.