



Episode 937: How to Deal with Annoying/Scammer Telemarketers: Sic These Hilarious Bots on Them

Guest: Roger Anderson

WOODS: I don't want to overstate things, so let me just put it this way: you are the greatest hero in American history.

ANDERSON: [laughing]

WOODS: This is absolutely tremendous what you've done. And I have to start off just by telling my own personal story, and then I'll let you carry most of this. But as I indicated before we went on, we've all had run-ins with not just telemarketers, but particularly scammer telemarketers, the ones who are telling you you've got a virus on your computer and only they can take it off or, "I'm from the IRS and you owe some money." And I had a recording left on my voicemail and I called them back, and of course it was a scam. As if you call the IRS and they say, "Hello, IRS." I wish that were the case, right?

ANDERSON: Right, after half a ring they answer the phone.

WOODS: Half a ring, they immediately answer, right. And of course his name is like Roger Sherman, but he doesn't sound like any Roger Sherman I've ever met. So anyway, so I talked to them and I had a little fun with them, and then I thought, Wait a minute, wait a minute. I host a podcast. Why don't I go home and call them and record the whole thing? Which indeed I did, and I told them they were being recorded, and we had a lot of fun with it. So on our show notes page for this episode I'm going to link to that episode, but what I did is like a grain of sand on the beach compared to what you have done. So explain how you – you actually say in an article for *Business Insider* that you personally can put a stop to this Windows pop-up scam, where this pop-up window appears, there's a virus on your computer, you have to call us on the phone. How can you do that?

ANDERSON: So yes, first of all, I build robots – I'm not a particularly funny guy, right, but I program robots to then interact with these telemarketers so that way I didn't have to. And as you probably encountered with that, that was fun for one phone call. Now imagine trying to do that day after day after day. Eventually it would get old, and your time is much more valuable than whoever you're talking to on the phone. So I said we have to automate this, and so I programmed robots to do it instead. So my robots sound convincingly human, enough at least to tie them up for anywhere from 30

seconds to sometimes 20 minutes or more, these robots will keep these people engaged.

But I got a Windows pop-up on my computer and I thought, Wait a minute, I'm a telephone guy; I work on phone systems. I have a really big telephone system at my disposal, and it's guaranteed to be bigger than their phone system, whoever these Windows support scammers are, and I have robots that sound like humans. So what if I combine those two together and just crush them, just pound them into the sand? And that's what I did. I programmed this phone system to call on 20 simultaneous channels for about 1,000 phone calls. And I was expecting the worst, and after maybe 15 minutes they shut off the number. And that's when I realized that I have the ability and the technology to, once I find a phone number that's definitely a scammer number, I can just pound it into the ground until they have to shut it down. They have no choice but to shut it off, because as soon as they hang up the phone, two seconds later another robot's calling them.

It's a little scary and it sounds illegal and it's technology that I wouldn't want to release into the hands of just anybody because, being a phone guy, I really, really respect the telecom network and I certainly wouldn't want to do that to anybody accidentally or wouldn't want anyone to do it as a prank to someone else, but certainly these Windows support scammers and these fake IRS scammers, I think there's no question in anyone's mind that those guys need to go away.

WOODS: Oh yeah, it's absolutely horrible, because of course I'm making fun of the silliness of their plan that they're actually going to have me – they wanted me to get in the car, stay on the phone with them while I drove to Target, which, I don't have a Target within half an hour of me, but –

ANDERSON: I know that call, yeah. I listened to your call. That was very, very funny.

WOODS: Oh, okay, good, yeah. And that was their plan. But on the other hand, obviously it works on some people, and so –

ANDERSON: And it just breaks your heart when you hear about it.

WOODS: Yeah.

ANDERSON: Yeah, and if you're savvy enough to know better, then it's almost like it's your civic duty to spend time on the phone with them so they can't call that victim next.

WOODS: Right, right. Yeah, keep them on the line with somebody who knows what their game is so that some naive or uninformed person doesn't get snookered. So it was very gratifying, by the way, not long after I aired that episode to see all these news reports about an operation that took them down. Hundreds of them were taken into custody and a bunch of them are in jail. So who knows what the collective actions of so many people may have contributed to.

So explain to me now – talk to me like I'm seven, because I don't know how telecom works at all. I mean, not every number that they create is one of your people going to find out about, so at some point, they can start a new number and then you won't know what that new number is and then they're safe, right?

ANDERSON: Yeah, that's the unfortunate thing. It's like whack-a-mole. I'll shut of a number, but then they just – and then they cycle the numbers very quickly. In the case of the fake IRS, unfortunately, they'll leave 50,000 voicemails out there and if they don't get a call back within a day, then probably they never will, and so then they just cycle the number and get a new number. So it's very difficult to keep up with the phone numbers in the case of when they leave a message. And the same thing with Windows: they can just cycle those numbers very quickly. And it's impossible to keep up.

So in much the same way that I've automated the ability to disable these numbers through just a flood of crushing phone calls and fake people, the process of collecting and harvesting these bad numbers also needs to be automated, and then we could potentially do it. But that's going to take more than just some guy with a laptop trying to poke around the Internet trying to find these numbers. It's going to have to take some automation from some people harvesting numbers. And I'm working with some groups to help with that, but strangely enough, because it sounds illegal – it technically is a telephonic denial of service. I'm crushing that number through a flood of phone calls. And because of that, there's no corporation in the world that's going to want to help me do that. No lawyer's going to say that's okay to do. And so that's really my challenge, and that's why I've kind of – it's not that I've backed off, it's just that it's not really – my core product with Jolly Roger Telephone is to try to help protect the consumer from telemarketing, and so I have sort of a different way to do that on the inbound side. But it's fun to do, it's fun to write about, and it's fun to listen to some of these calls as their call center just goes away.

WOODS: Yeah, absolutely. Now, there is an app called Mr. Number. Are you familiar with Mr. Number?

ANDERSON: Yes, I am, yeah.

WOODS: Okay, which isn't exactly what you're calling for, because it can be used for all kinds of things. You can just block an unwanted call from anybody you want. But I think it gives you the option to, if other people have identified a number as a scam number, you can type the number in and see if other people have indeed flagged it.

ANDERSON: That's right.

WOODS: So that's the beginning of something.

ANDERSON: That's right. Now, in much the same way that it's your civic duty to waste the time of a telemarketer, if you think about it, the more and more people who block these bad players, their machines – first of all, these guys, they just use machines to dial the phones. So they'll just load up machines with 100,000 numbers, and the machine will go and try to get somebody on the phone, and then when they get

somebody on the phone, a real human on the phone, then they'll send it off to an agent. So if you're blocking telemarketers, all you're doing is encouraging that machine to just call the next person. You're moving – all of that traffic and all of the scammers move away from people who are using these apps and move on to the less sophisticated people who don't use these apps and unfortunately are more likely to get scammed.

So the concept of Jolly Roger Telephone is: let's intercept those calls when they're calling you, and I have robots that sound like people, and they won't give anything up. And so these scammers will call you and then Jolly Roger Telephone intercepts the call, chats with that telemarketer, and it consumes their time so that they can't call the next guy. If my robot is on the phone for eight minutes with a telemarketer, then maybe that telemarketer doesn't have time to call a couple people today, and that's the goal of trying to just create a black hole that just sucks all these telemarketers' time into this black hole.

WOODS: Right, yeah, so now I want to talk about that in particular and your service. So I'm over at your website right now. And it's Jolly Roger Telephone Company. Your name is Roger; is that where you got the idea? I mean, of course I -

ANDERSON: Yeah, that was a completely whimsical idea. I never expected this. This was just a hobby at home, and I ended up posting an audio recording on YouTube, a couple recordings on YouTube, and just the whimsical idea of calling it the Jolly Roger Telephone Company, because I didn't at the time – you know, I'm just a quiet introvert. I never expected anybody to even know my last name, and so I just posted some stuff and called it the Jolly Roger Telephone Company, and that was how it kind of started. But yeah, and then it just grew from there.

WOODS: I have to say the bar you have on the top of the screen, what my eye was instantly drawn to was "Pick a Robot." I thought that sounds like something I'd enjoy doing [laughing]. So I clicked on "Pick a Robot," so now I'm scrolling through. So I went right to Salty Sally. That was very appealing to me. She's a busy mom, she's trying to listen to the telemarketer's call, but she's got this teenage daughter who keeps distracting her, and so she has to say to the telemarketer, "I'm sorry. You're going to have to start all over again [laughing]." So it's so great. And this is a caller who's trying to get her credit card information, so these people absolutely deserve at the very least what's being done to them.

So I want to know how the service actually works. If I get a call from somebody and I don't instantly know that it's a scammer, how do I turn on your system? How does that work?

ANDERSON: So there are several ways to do it. The most surefire way and the way this all started was that I just provide a phone number for these various robots, and all you have to do is conference in, just using three-way call or just Add a Call if you're using a mobile phone.

WOODS: Ah, okay.

ANDERSON: And just call into a robot, merge the calls together, and then mute yourself and listen along. And it's very entertaining, especially when you're just plagued by – and everyone sort of has various flavors of telemarketers that they get. Like I'm in Southern California, so I get the solar scammers or the air conditioning guys. And so if you're on a list – and you'll never get off that list, by the way. You can yell at them, shout at them, that person can quit the company. They don't have any control of the autodialer anyway. When you say, "Take me off your list," it's not like they can. These guys, they don't care. And so that machine will just call you tomorrow and the next day and the next day. You'll never get that machine to stop calling you.

So the idea here is when you get this call, you conference in a Jolly Roger Telephone robot. It's very satisfying. And then at the end of the call, I will send you a recording of the interaction, and so you'll have it as a WAV file in an email. So you need to be a subscriber. It's only \$6 per year to subscribe to the service, and you get unlimited calls into these robots where you can conference them in.

Now, since then it's involved into some more automation. I can now – most landlines have a simultaneous ring feature, where you can ring another number simultaneously. And I give you a number, and then when you get a phone call, it rings me at the same time. I can look up the caller ID of that caller using a cloud-based service, and then that service tells me if it's a likely telemarketer. If it is, I'll answer automatically. So you might get a little short burst of ring on your home phone, and then Jolly Roger Telephone has picked up the call, chats for a while, and your phone is idle at home ready to receive more calls. Meanwhile, I've intercepted that telemarketer, and when the call's over, you'll just get an email. So sometimes people say that their phones will ring once and then ten minutes later they get an email from Jolly Roger of a robot talking to that scammer, and that part is very entertaining as well. And you don't have to lift a finger. In that case, it's all automatic. Same thing for Google Voice, and then I'm working on a mobile phone product to use for mobiles.

WOODS: Wow, this is great. \$6 a year. I mean, come on. This entertainment is not worth \$6 a year to people?

ANDERSON: Yeah, I just want to be the world's answering machine. I want it to be low cost, no-brainer. There's no reason not to subscribe. And at least you can finally turn those annoying telemarketers into entertainment, and it really does work.

WOODS: Right. Okay, I want to play a couple of clips in a minute, but first let's give people the website. It's JollyRogerTelCo.com, and you're just going to love clicking on "Pick a Robot," and you get to listen to clips of the different bots you might want to use. So how does this – just tell me about this service. I think I know the answer, but yeah, you have us pick a robot – so is this – do I subscribe to one particular bot, or do I have all the choices?

ANDERSON: You have all the choices, yeah. Once you sign up, then all of those telephone numbers are available to you. I just need to know your caller ID and your email address, and that's why you need to sign up, so I can send you the recordings.

WOODS: Okay, all right, this is good. And I love the names of them. You've got Whiskey Jack. I really wouldn't want to call Whiskey Jack, I'll tell you that. I wouldn't

want to be on the phone with that guy. I like Whitey Whitebeard, sounds like fun. I mean, a whole bunch, of course all keeping with the Jolly Roger schtick. So let's play – I think I'd like to play – you actually sent this to me. You've actually uploaded it to YouTube. Can we play that creepy one of the so-called IRS agent? He's flirting with one of your bots. Now that's funny. But then as you write, "Eventually threatens to come over to her apartment and shoot her."

ANDERSON: Yeah, that was creepy, yeah, absolutely.

WOODS: Let's go ahead and play that for the audience right now.

[Recording plays]

All right, whoa. Now, you can do that too if you join this service. You can have an experience like that [laughing]. The great thing about bots, of course, is that no matter what insults are thrown at them, they just barrel on ahead. They are unperturbed.

ANDERSON: They are very friendly and agreeable and patient, and in some ways, that gets under their skin, because some of these guys, they just want – You can imagine being a telemarketer. I don't have a lot of sympathy for these guys, but it must be a really boring, dull, horrible job to be one of these telemarketers. And not all of them are scammers. I don't want to say that all telemarketers are scammers.

WOODS: No.

ANDERSON: But as a telecom guy who loves the telephone network, I hate telemarketing. Even legitimate outbound, unsolicited telemarketing – if there is such a thing as "legitimate" – even those guys, I really want the industry to just go away. I hate the industry of outbound calling. So even if they're nice people, I just don't want this to happen. So that's why I've got these robots that just suck down their time. And they're very patient, and some of these guys, they've just got these horrible jobs where they work in a boiler room and all day long they have to talk on the phone, and sometimes I think for their own entertainment they try to just make you mad. They try to get this, you know, "Take me off your list." "I'm not taking you off. I'm cycling so you get more calls." You know, they tease you. And my robots don't rise to that bait, and so I think that oftentimes gets them even more angry, and so they get more abusive and more abusive and it just doesn't work, and that confuses the telemarketer until they eventually just have to hang up.

WOODS: Well, if I may make an analogy to something that I do – of course I would never in a million years want to do telemarketing, but I do email marketing. But there the rules are pretty well known, that you can't send unsolicited email to a whole bunch of people. Or even if they have asked for your email, you can't send them unrelated stuff, or that would be considered spam. So you have to opt in. You have to explicitly opt in: yes, I want to receive correspondence from this person. And that I think is a good, reasonable solution. I have a landline phone only because I prefer to have it so that I can send old-fashioned faxes. I vastly prefer the fax to the scanner, but that's a

whole – I have a quirk about – I think the scanner's like 12 steps; fax, I just put it right through the – Doesn't matter.

ANDERSON: Yeah, yeah.

WOODS: So it used to be the case that for audio – I used to do a lot of radio interviews and it's better quality than a cellphone. But Skype's even better than the landline, so I don't even need it anymore. But there's nobody who even knows the number of this landline, so anytime it rings, I know it's a telemarketer. Anytime. So I could just put your service on constantly, because nobody should be calling that number.

ANDERSON: Right, in that case, you would just forward that to me. That's exactly right, yeah.

WOODS: Yeah, and I'll let Jolly Roger take care of that. Well, speaking of Jolly Roger, let's play the clip – now, you have a six-minute clip of Jolly Roger. That's the classic, if we may say, voice here. This is your voice. And in particular, we'll go to the part with the "There's a bee on me," which apparently became sort of the classic line associated with this, so we're going to play that right now. This is one of the robots you can choose at JollyRogerTelCo.com. All right, here we go.

[Recording plays]

All right, one other thing. How does it work – is the bot going to be speaking over the telemarketer, or does it wait for pauses? How does it work?

ANDERSON: Well, yeah, and it took forever to develop this algorithm because I never wanted anyone accidentally to this, and so I had to do some very selective picking and choosing on my home phone at home. That's how all this began, is I intercepted calls and it would challenge the caller: "Press one if you're a real person," and then it would ring my house. And then if you didn't press one, you were probably some sort of autodialer or something that way, and so I had to wait for repeat calls, and it was a very long development process. But yes, it detects noise, inflection. It tries to do a little speech recognition, but a lot of these telemarketers are calling from poor quality systems or there's a lot of background noise or they have heavy accents, and so speech recognition is not enough to try to determine what's going upon, and so there's a lot of listening in to noise and inflection and things that way.

But once you – it's interesting, because these robots, once you know they're a robot it's not very convincing. And if you're trying to have a normal conversation with a robot, again, it's not very convincing. But telemarketers, they just want to hear "yes." If you understand the banter and the patterns of a telemarketer, they just want to hear "yes," and they want to hear someone who's interested and, heavens, once you're on the phone for three minutes with a telemarketer, they think they've struck gold because their calls never last that long. And so they'll just keep talking, and by the time you get to eight minutes, they've invested so much time into that call, now they really don't want to hang up. They're really trying to convince Whitey Whitebeard, the old man – they're really trying to convince him that he needs to buy

some Viagra, because he's been on the phone for eight minutes, so he must be interested, right? And so it's kind of interesting that these telemarketers, once you understand the banter and the pattern of how they talk and engage with you, I developed a robot around that banter is what ended up happening.

WOODS: Okay, so this is not like the person speaks to the bot and there's just like a recording of three minutes of responses.

ANDERSON: No, it's very complicated, yeah. There's a lot of complexity behind the scenes to make all this work out and convince the telemarketer that they're engaged and interested.

WOODS: Okay, let's say you have a particularly dull telemarketer who never really catches on. How long in principle could this go on?

ANDERSON: Well, I have had calls go on for over 20 minutes and they seem to be – It's funny, it seems to be a cable company, these cable and Internet companies, because they ask you if you like movies – they ask a lot of yes or no questions. But I certainly have telemarketers, IRS, Windows support – I certainly have got a lot of them going on for well over 20 minutes. It's not super common, but I have hundreds, probably like thousands of calls that last well over 20, 30 minutes.

WOODS: Wow. Wow, that's amazing. That's really amazing.

ANDERSON: And it's very satisfying to think that that person can – I just wasted 20, 30 minutes of that person's time, plus break time. And by the way, when an agent is engaged, getting back to the telecom, those autodialers, autodialers get busy signals, ring no answer, answering machines, voicemail. Autodialers fail to connect to a human being most of the time. Whatever their ratio is, 5% of the time they might get a real person. So if you have a telemarketer who's idle, who's not on the phone in your operation, those autodialers will crank up and call 20, 30, 40 calls at once just to try to get a human being to feed to that telemarketer. So if I can tie up a telemarketer for 10 minutes, those autodialers have to crank back down again and they can't call as many channels. So even though I've tied up a telemarketer for 20 minutes, I may have prevented thousands of telephone calls on the network during that engagement.

WOODS: Yeah, absolutely. Now, is it possible for me not as a telemarketer but as somebody who's curious to see how this would work, can I play with the bot myself? Can I call up and use it?

ANDERSON: Yes. So everybody gets a couple free phone calls into the bot, and then you can also subscribe – for 2 bucks you could subscribe for a month if you want to just play with them unlimited. But yeah, everybody can call the bots and listen in, and then I've got a very active YouTube channel and you can listen to plenty of examples of these robots there.

WOODS: All right, that sounds like fun. Now is there anything I've left out of this story that you want to tell?

ANDERSON: Well, I do have a line of business bots. So the business side of telemarketing is cold calling, and businesses are oftentimes crushed under the weight of cold callers. So receptionists especially or any of the admins or secretaries who work for the CFOs and CTOs and things like that, those guys get cold calls all the time. And so I do have a line of business bots that are designed for cold callers, and that sounds like kind of a crazy receptionist, and then there's an office worker that she transfers to.

WOODS: [laughing]

ANDERSON: So the receptionist will eventually transfer to the office worker, and then the office worker will eventually transfer back to the receptionist, and I have had calls go back and forth a couple times with those two. So yeah, there's a line for businesses as well.

WOODS: I am looking at it right now. Boy, that is – [laughing] that's just unbelievable. So how long have you been doing this? When did this all start?

ANDERSON: This started in February of 2016 –

WOODS: Oh, so it's been going a while.

ANDERSON: It has; it has. I'm very fortunate. And somehow – this is the crazy thing. You know, there's a lot of haters on the Internet –

WOODS: No, I refuse to believe that.

ANDERSON: I know, right? And so what is interesting is I've managed to find something – and thank goodness, because like I said, I'm just a quiet introvert. I'm the guy behind the wall plugging wires together and you guys talk. I'm usually the guy behind the scenes. So I don't have the shields set up for abuse and hate. I just didn't know how I would handle that. And that's why originally when I posted this, I just didn't even use my last name. I just faked it behind Jolly Roger Telephone Company. And somehow, I've managed to tap into something that worldwide is just loved. Everybody loves it all over the world and I just don't have any of that hate directed at me, thank goodness. I'm not inviting it on your show. But everybody seems to hate telemarketers and everybody seems to love what I'm doing, and I'm very, very fortunate.

WOODS: How do you promote this? I guess not through cold calling.

ANDERSON: Definitely not. You can imagine I have an aversion to marketing myself because I – and it's not that I mind email marketing. That's great. Like you said, people at least opt in for that and we have sophisticated spam blockers to prevent email marketing that we don't want to see. So I've been very fortunate. There's a lot of word of mouth. There's an online community that is much better at social networking than I am, and so much the same way you heard about me, a lot of other people are hearing about me as well. I get, fortunately, a lot of press and people interested that way. But I do not advertise yet. I just don't – and I certainly don't make a lot of cold calls and I don't send a lot of email out, so yeah, this is all word of mouth.

WOODS: Well, it's amazing, and of course it didn't hurt to have that article in *Business Insider*, and then somebody posted that in my private Facebook group and said, You've got to talk to this guy. And I took one look at it, and at first I thought, Well, I'm not sure – maybe we would discuss this for three minutes and then we'd have nothing else to say, and then the more I thought about it, I thought, No, no, I have a million things I want to ask this guy. And then plus, playing excerpts is just the icing on the cake [laughing]. Being able to play the clips. I mean, the thing sells itself. And the thing is you don't have an affiliate program. I have no affiliate connection with you whatsoever. I just think you're doing something really great and that people can have fun with and that, in many cases, you really, really are fighting against terrible injustices and having a blast doing it. How could it be better than that?

So I really do hope – now, if you're on the road, you can't write down the website, the show notes page for today is TomWoods.com/937. That's where I'll have the link. But if you are able to jot it down or you're at your computer, it's JollyRogerTelCo.com. And you're going to have fun playing with the site, but then don't just leave. I mean, 6 bucks a year? You can find that – that just means every month you find 50 cents in your couch cushions. I think you can do that. So help out Roger because he's doing great work and it's fun, and it's a service we all want and need, so check it out. I really appreciate your time and I hope you continue to have great success with this.

ANDERSON: Well, thank you so much, and thank you very much for all the kind words. I really appreciate that. That's nice.