

Stopping Annoying Robocalls

During the 2016 spring session, the Advocacy Workshop investigated possible solutions to annoying robocalls and/or fraudulent calls we all receive despite being on the Do Not Call list. We discovered several options to solve this problem. They are:

Option 1: Nomorobo (free)

Sign up with www.nomorobo.com. This service is free to the consumer, but you need to check to see if your phone carrier supports this software.

Nomorobo has a list of recognized robocall numbers and will block these numbers by disconnecting them prior to your hearing a second ring. If a robocall still gets through, you can contact Nomorobo and they will investigate the number before adding it to their list of blocked numbers.

The service will still allow calls from doctors' offices, school emergency numbers, political calls, charities, etc. This feature works only for digital phone lines. It is not available for wireless phones or traditional analog landlines.

Regarding the major carries in our area:

- Comcast Xfinity—can supply this feature if you have residential Xfinity Voice Unlimited service
- Cox—has the prerequisite digital signal, but does not currently have the simultaneous ring capability at their head end, which is also required for Nomorobo.
- RCN -- can supply this feature as long as your phone number originated with them
- Verizon FIOS –works if you have Fios Digital Voice service; Fios fiber to the premises does not allow the simultaneous ring needed. Check your bill or online to see which service you have.

Note: The FCC and FTC allow a simultaneous ring, but the phone companies are pushing back and some are not allowing it. Therefore, consumers need to put pressure on their phone companies to help resolve or diminish this problem.

Option 2: Machines

If your phone company does not support a software solution to robocalls, you might consider technology to fight the nuisance yourself.

a. Phone Solutions:

Your first line of defense is caller ID. You can just look at the incoming caller's phone number and not answer a call that reads "unavailable" or shows any other information that tells you this is a call you don't want to answer. There may be an addition charge for this feature.

The next level of defense is an audio caller ID function on some newer phones. The phone plays an audio of the caller ID, so you don't have to run to the phone to know who is calling. The advantage is that you can choose to ignore a call from across the room and don't have to stop what you are doing to decide whether or not to answer.

A related solution, available if you have your phone and TV service with the same provider, is having the caller ID displayed on your TV screen. Cox, for example offers this service.

Some newer phones also offer built-in call-blocking technology.

b. Call-Blocking Technology:

Every time someone places a phone call, the number they are calling from is transmitted along the phone line. Even when the caller ID reads "blocked," the number is still transmitted, it is just hidden from your view at the caller's request. Call-blocking technology uses this transmitted number to determine if your phone will actually ring or not. The following are some issues to consider when purchasing such technology.

Most call blocking works with a white list (calls you want to receive) and/or a black list (calls you do not want to receive). Different machines set different limits to the number of phone numbers that you can add to these lists. Make sure the unit you are considering will hold all the numbers you may want to block, as maximums range from 30 to 1500 phone numbers, and sometimes further limit the number of area codes that can be stored.

Methods used to create the white lists and black lists vary dramatically. On the simple side, there are units that allow you to add an incoming call to a black list by pushing a button while the phone is ringing. Other systems require the caller to respond to a prerecorded message before your phone will ring—assuring that there is at least a real voice on the other end of the line. More sophisticated systems now answer without ringing the phone. If the system doesn't recognize the number, it will ask the caller to leave a brief message saying who they are; your phone then rings and plays the message to let you know who is calling. Once you have listened to the caller's message, you can:

- Accept the call
- Add it to your white list of verified callers so that in the future that number will ring through as normal
- Block the call this time and permanently by adding the number to your black list
- Send the caller to the answering machine, telling them you're not able to take the call at this time.

Many of these more advanced systems also allow you to create/review your white list and black list directly. Thus, you can add phone numbers en masse and do not have to wait until that particular phone number calls to block it or let it through.

With so many options available, it's important to be an educated consumer before you buy. Ask for a demonstration if you are buying in a store, or find the online manual for the unit that you

are considering purchasing online. This will help assure that you are comfortable with what the unit will do with your calls and with the process of setting up and using the system. Prices range from about \$40 for a simple stand-alone device to \$400 for a 4-phone system with more advanced call blocking options.

Unfortunately, call blockers aren't foolproof. Persistent callers can still outwit these technologies. For example, phone spoofing alters the number transmitted, so the caller won't be blocked. Placing a call with a calling card or using a pay phone can also evade call blockers. However, you can still make a big dent in the number of unwanted and robocalls you receive by investing in call-blocking technology.

Option 3: Contact Consumers Union Website

Sign the petition to end robocalls at www.consumersunion.org or www.endrobocalls.org. Consumers Union is working to fight robocalls. You can look at their website to check their progress.

Also:

If you answer a robocall, DO NOT speak into the phone. Technology on the other end is listening to know if a person rather than a machine answered the call and it will mark your number as one to continue calling.