

Bedevilled by small things

By Ruth Ostrow

I HAVE always found it is the small things in life that bring us down. Most of us rise, like great soldiers, to meet life's huge challenges. Weaned on the harsh truth that life can dish out many a fearful blow, we strive forward -- armed with our grief counsellors, friends and advisers -- to deal head-on with death, illness or financial disaster.

But what of those small, seemingly inconsequential things that erode our confidence and energy? How many mighty warriors have been felled by the frustration and powerlessness of dealing with bureaucracy, the noisy neighbour, the dog that won't stop barking, the tradesman who never shows up, or Telstra?

It's late morning, about two weeks before Christmas. It is a big thing that I am about to do. I am moving cities. But it is a small, small thing that I need Telstra to do. I want my old number diverted.

Believing that this will be a simple task, I press the buttons on my phone as instructed by the lifeless voice. I am told that I will experience "longer than normal delays" due to congestion. I'm in a good mood. I wait.

And wait. And wait. Finally I am through.

Ruth: "Yes, I'd like to have my phone diverted for 10 days over Christmas to my mobile, then I would like it connected to your voice service informing my callers of my new number."

Telstra: "I'm sorry. The computer can't do two things at once. You can have your phone diverted to your mobile now, but you must call back after you've moved into your new home."

January 5: I am all moved in. Happily. The big, big thing -- moving an entire life -- was easy. I was prepared. I was strong.

Now I want the small, small thing to be done. I push the buttons. I'm told I will experience "longer than normal delays" due to congestion. I wait. And wait.

Ruth: "Could you now give me the service where an operator tells callers my new number?"

Telstra: "Sure, no problem. It will be done by 3pm today."

At 8pm the job still hasn't been done. I'm getting a bit anxious. My mobile is not working very well. I am missing much-needed calls. I ring Telstra from a restaurant phone. Waiting, waiting.

Ruth: "Hello. Look I'm having a problem. I want my old phone line to stop diverting to my mobile and instead to connect to your answering service that gives my new home number."

Telstra: "I'm sorry. There is no order in for that line. I'll put you through to a supervisor." Waiting, waiting.

Ruth: "Hello. Look, can you help me? My phone is supposed to be connecting..."

Telstra: "The computer seems a bit funny today. Right. I've fixed it up. It will go through by 9am in the morning. Good night."

Ruth: "Wait. Give me your name and number in case there are problems."

Telstra: "I'm sorry. We can't give out our numbers. My name is Edna. I am in Brisbane."

Next morning, 10am. No voice service. I have a nerve rash.

Ruth: "Hello, Telstra? Look, my phone was supposed to be connected to your voice service by 9am. Now it's telling me my line has been cut off. Edna promised it would be okay. Please help me. No one knows how to find me. I am losing valuable calls."

Fran from Telstra: "Well, for some reason the order is in for next week."

Ruth: "But my old line will be given away by then. Mandy, Jennifer and Edna all promised..."

Telstra: "There must be a glitch in the computer."

Ruth: "Well, can you rescue my old phone number before it gets given away, and reconnect it to the changed-number voice service?" Waiting, waiting.

Telstra: "It's done. I've re-ordered it. It will divert in the next hour. No, the computer can't do it any faster. We have no control over our new computers." I call again at 12.30pm.

Ruth: "Hello, is anyone called Fran there, from the Melbourne office?"

Telstra: "No. This is Don from our Launceston office."

Ruth: "Look, my phone was supposed to be diverted. Fran promised [whole frustrating story retold]."

Telstra: "An order was placed but seems to have been cancelled for some reason. Our computers are now very inflexible. Sometimes we have to ring the exchanges manually. I'll do that for you now." Waiting, waiting.

Telstra: "Hello, Ruth. The computer is telling me it can't do it before 2.30pm today. But it'll definitely be on by then ... Yes, I promise."

At 2.45pm I ring my number. "The person you are dialling now has a new telephone number. Please call 12554 for Telstra's changed-number service." I feel much relief. I dial 12554. "Can I please have the new number for [old number]?"

Changed-number service: "I'm sorry. There is no new number coming up."

Ruth: "It can't be..." I am transferred to Telstra. Waiting, waiting.

Ruth: "Can I speak to a supervisor?" Waiting, waiting.

Telstra: "John Smith here. What's your problem?"

Ruth: "Look, here is my story [entire ordeal]. Please, please help me. I'm losing calls. I'm a journalist. People don't know how to get hold of me. I'm out of touch with the world. Help me."

Telstra: "I'll fix it for you. I'll call you back. And here is my direct line if you have any more problems."

Ruth: "Thank you. I'll call in half an hour if I haven't heard from you."

Ruth: "Hello John. I haven't heard from you. Could you please tell me what's happening?"

Telstra: "I haven't been able to fix the problem yet."

About 4pm the phone rings twice. First Don, then the supervisor John, telling me I am now officially connected to the service.

"But what was the problem?" I ask John. "Could be the computer," he says. "Could be human error. We don't know."

I check my line. Ring 12554 twice. All working. My body begins to relax. I soak in a hot tub. Have a nap, smile for the first time in two days.

9pm: I call 12554 just to double-check. "Could you give me the new number for [old number]?"

Telstra: "Sorry, dear. We have no listing for that number."

It is 10pm and I've been struck mute. No one is immune from the battle fatigue of dealing with small things. I'm surrendering. Pulling the plug.

I am now nobody. I have ceased to exist. I have been confined to the annals of anonymity by Telstra and the computer glitch. Unless Telstra finds me before my deadline, by the time you read this, dear readers, I will be telecommunicationally dead.

PS: By late morning the next day, the service is finally working. Michael Herskope, Telstra's group manager, public affairs, suggests that perhaps the fault was mine. That I created confusion about the exact product I wanted. Maybe so. But then again, I am not known for being inarticulate.

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