

## EM9005b: *Struck Dumb by the Incredible: 1-800-NOTHING*

By JAMES BARRON

In an age of instant communication, when entire encyclopedias of information are transmitted over telephone lines in minutes and businesses count on getting through to far-flung offices in seconds, the loss of telephone service is unthinkable.

Yesterday, America thought about it. For a few hours in midafternoon, millions of people did what they always do – they dialed a 1, an area code and a number. And then, nothing. Or a mysterious busy signal. Or a recording saying, "All circuits are busy."

Suddenly, the heat was off in telephone boiler rooms. Operators were standing by at toll-free 800 numbers. Fast-talking clerks in rental-car reservation centers had no one to quote prices of subcompacts, compacts and full-sized models to. Information-retrieval services had huge pileups of information waiting to be disseminated. Home shoppers who wanted to let their fingers do the walking couldn't. Long-distance romancers were blocked from babbling their sweet nothings, but could scribble them in love letters sealed with a kiss. Telemarketers, who never called a customer they didn't like, could only sit and wait.

Because calling in was a problem, so was checking in. "I can tell you this is the most serious thing I've seen in terms of phone-service problems in the 18 years I've been in the business," said Robert Salmon, an executive of Holiday Inns of Salt Lake City, with

300 operators.

On the theory that roomlessness is worse than phonelessness, Holiday Inns tried to re-route its East Coast calls, which normally go to a reservations center in North Carolina. Some of the calls went to Mr. Salmon's operation, and others to a similar center in Chicago.

Calling out was no easier. Mr. Salmon said he was unable to reach the company's Memphis headquarters.

"Sometimes you get through and sometimes you don't," said Linda Daroci, the chief operator at the Airport Marriott Hotel near Los Angeles International Airport.

Some travel agents complained that they were getting nowhere, even though they dialed airline reservation numbers over and over. The airlines realized something was wrong when the phones stopped ringing. An American Airlines spokeswoman, Mary O'Neill, said the number of calls coming in dropped by two-thirds.

At British Airways, a clerk, Mike Juliano, said things became unusually quiet between 2 and 4 P.M. in the reservations center in Queens. "At a certain point in the afternoon," he said, "we didn't get as many calls as we would have gotten normally."

The sound of no phones' ringing caused some worry about red ink. A branch manager for Dial America Marketing in Omaha, David Haller, told The A.P. that if the phone problem was not repaired quickly, his magazine-subscription company would lose a mini-

mum of \$20,000, "and that's conservative."

Entrepreneurs were not the only ones with phone headaches. The only big domestic story on "The CBS Evening News" last night was about how millions of long-distance callers who use the American Telephone and Telegraph Company could not get through. The only problem with covering the big story was the story itself. Producers at the CBS Broadcast Center in Manhattan could not get through to news bureaus. Donna Dees, a CBS News spokeswoman, said the network solved the problem by switching its voice-communication lines to ITT.

Computerized information-retrieval services, which can summon items like 10-year-old newspaper clippings or 10-day-old court decisions, kept on retrieving information. But the Lexis and Nexis services could not send out the material from their headquarters in Dayton, Ohio.

A customer-service representative, Nicky Foster, said 377 printers around the country that were connected to telephone lines were dead for an hour. The delay stretched on for so long that forgetful newspaper reporters trying to retrieve stories they wrote months ago forgot what they were trying to retrieve.

"Unfortunately when it's A.T.&T., we're at their mercy," said Linda Gibbons, Ms. Foster's boss. "Certain things are beyond our control."

The article EM9005b reprinted above is used in Figure 11.8b of the STAT 221 Course Materials.