

How to escape the automated phone maze

Here are shortcuts for dodging automated phone systems and reaching a real person at 60 local and national companies and government agencies. In most cases, we chose the phone numbers and menu options for existing customers. When possible, we avoided keying in phone, account or other numbers. Sometimes, though, it may be faster to provide that information if you have it.

Category	Company	Phone number	How to reach a human	Time to reach a human	Comments	The Scorecard*
BANKS	Bank of America	206-461-0800 or 800-442-6680	Press 0 immediately.	30 seconds; 1 min. for 800 number	Pressing 0 is now mentioned after a long list of options in the opening menu.	Better
	Key Bank	800-539-2968	Remain on the line; press nothing.	2 min.		Worse
	US Bank	800-872-2657	Press 1 for English; 0 for a "specialist"; 6 for help with more than one product. Or wait through the menu of choices to be transferred.	1.5 min.	Once in queue for an agent, you're still encouraged to return to automated system after they give the estimated wait time.	Shorter hold time, but more complicated steps to reach a human.
	Washington Mutual	800-788-7000	Press 0 immediately, then press 0 again.	1 min.		Same
	Wells Fargo	800-869-3557	Press 0 immediately. Wait through prompt for account number.	3 min.		Worse
CELLPHONE COMPANIES	Cingular	866-246-4852	Press 0 for a representative.	1 min.		Better
	Sprint Nextel	800-480-4727	Press 1, then 2. Press 0 twice, then say "agent" twice.	2 min.		Better
	T-Mobile	800-866-2453	Press 2 for existing customers, say "English," then "representative."	1.5 min.		Better
	Verizon Wireless	800-922-0204	Press 0 a total of five times, once after each prompt.	2 min.		Worse
CREDIT/FINANCIAL SERVICES	American Express	800-528-4800	Press 0 or say "representative" a total of three times, once after each prompt.	6.5 min.	System warned of an unusually high call volume; suggested trying again later or going to Web site.	Worse
	Capital One	800-955-7070	Press 0 four times, once after each prompt.	6 min.	Monotonous hold music interspersed with ads for other Capital One products.	Worse
	Mastercard	800-622-7747	Press 1 for English, then press 0.	30 seconds		Better
	Safeco Insurance	800-332-3226	Press 1 for homeowner, 3 for policy questions, then 0 three times to reach a call-routing center where a human can direct your call.	1.5 min.		Shorter wait, but harder to reach a human.
	Visa	800-847-2911	Press 1 for English, then press 0 twice when prompted for account number.	30 seconds	We were cut off while being transferred to a human the first time.	Better
GOVERNMENT	King County District Courts	206-205-9200	Press 6.	6.5 min.	You're disconnected if you call during a busy time and told to call back later.	Same
	State Department of Licensing	Call local office	Press 1 after announcements about the Web site and office hours, then stay on the line through a long menu to be transferred to a representative.	2 min.		Same
	State Department of Labor and Industries	Call local office	Press 1, then 0.	30 seconds		Same
	Seattle Municipal Court	206-684-5600	Press 1, then 0.	5 min.		Worse
	U.S. Passport Services Office	877-487-2778	When prompted to select English or another language, press nothing. The system assumes you have a rotary-dial phone and transfers you immediately to a representative.	1 min.		Same
	U.S. Postal Service	800-275-8777	Say "agent" once after each prompt. Then press 2 for customer service.	1.5 min.		New to the list
	U.S. Social Security Admin.	800-772-1213	Press 1 to interrupt opening announcement, 1 again for English. Then say "customer service" twice. Then press # twice when prompted for your Social Security number.	3 min.	System notes that their phones are busiest early in the week and early in the month. You get an estimated wait time – and repetitive messages encouraging you to do your business on their Web site.	New to the list
INTERNET SERVICE PROVIDERS	AOL	800-827-6364	Press 0 a total of 18 (!) times, once after each prompt. Alternative: Say "customer service" six times, then press 0 once.	3.5 min.	One of the worst phone systems of any company we called. The system insisted 17 times that we enter an account number, home phone number or ZIP code before agreeing to transfer to an agent.	Much worse
	Comcast	888-266-2278	Ignore two requests to enter your phone number, pressing nothing. Press 1 for English. Then press 1 for existing customers. Press 0 twice when asked to choose a menu option.	2 min.	New feature called "Virtual Hold" lets Comcast call you back rather than waiting on hold. We entered a phone number and were told they'd call back within four minutes. Thirty seconds later, the phone rang, and we were transferred to a representative.	Better
	EarthLink	888-327-8454	Press 0 four times.	1.5 min.		Better
PHONE	AT&T	800-222-0300	Press 1 for English, then 0 each of the four times you are prompted for your phone number. Then say "agent" twice.	7 min.		Worse
	Qwest	800-244-1111	Say "representative" five times, once after each prompt, or press # five times.	1 min.		Better
RETAIL PRODUCTS/SERVICES	Amazon.com	206-266-2992	A human being picked up on the second ring.	15 seconds		Lots better
	Best Buy	888-237-8289	Press 2 for someone to direct your call.	30 seconds		Much better
	Circuit City	800-843-2489	Press 0.	45 seconds		Better
	Costco	800-220-6000	Press 0 twice, ignoring warnings that it's an invalid option.	1.5 min.		Worse
	eBay	800-322-9266	Press 3 for an operator, who transfers you to a customer-service department.	12.5 min.	Worst hold time of any of the companies we tried. Hold music kept fading in and out like a badly tuned radio station. A strongly worded message noted that most issues are handled only by e-mail.	Much worse
	Macy's	206-506-6000	Press 3 for account information. Then say "customer service" five or six times, ignoring prompts for your account number or, surprisingly, your Social Security number. Or press 5 to page the executive on duty, then ask for the "At Your Service" desk for general store questions. Or press 0 for an automated operator if you know which department you want.	2 min.	They promised last year to tell callers in the first phone menu how to reach a live operator, it's still not easy.	Worse
	Nordstrom	888-282-6060	Direct to human.	0 min.	Fastest phone pickup of any company we called.	Same – still the best.
	The Seattle Times	206-464-2121	Press 0.	1 min.		Better
	Starbucks	800-235-2883	Press 0	2 min.		Much better
	Ticketmaster	206-628-0888	Press 2, then 6, then 2.	1.5 min.	You can't avoid annoying ads and announcements.	Better
TECHNOLOGY	Apple	800-676-2775	Press 0, then 0 again.	2.5 min.		Better
	Compaq	800-752-0900	Say "connect."	1 min.		Better
	Dell	800-624-9897	Say "agent" three or four times.	3 min.	New estimated wait-time feature said our wait would be greater than 5 minutes, during which we listened to announcements about Dell's battery recall.	Quicker route to a human, but a longer wait.
	Microsoft	800-642-7676	Press 0 four times, ignore warnings that "inaccurate key press has been detected."	1.5 min.		Worse
TRAVEL	Alaska Air	800-252-7522	Press 3.	30 seconds	Don't press that 0! It takes you back to the beginning of the phone menu.	Better
	American	800-433-7300	Press 0 twice. When automated voice comes on, say "agent."	2 min.	New estimated wait-time feature said we'd wait 1 minute; a human answered 10 seconds later.	Better
	Amtrak	800-872-7245	Don't try to outsmart "Julie," the perky automated voice, by staying silent. Say "agent," then confirm by saying "yes."	2 min.		Worse
	Continental	800-523-3273	Say "agent," then "domestic."	5 min.	New estimated wait-time feature predicted an 8-minute wait. Actual: 5 minutes.	Better
	Delta	800-221-1212	Say "representative" twice.	1 min.	Extra credit for telling callers to say "representative" in the opening menu.	Better
	Expedia	800-397-3342	Say "agent" twice.	5 min.		Worse
	Northwest	800-225-2525	Say "existing reservation." Then say "agent." Then say "yes" twice.	4 min.	Pressing 0 or asking for an agent upfront traps you in a repeated menu loop.	Worse
	SeaTac Airport	206-433-5388	Press 9.	1 min.		Better
	Southwest	800-435-9792	Direct to agent.	20 seconds		Same
	United	800-864-8331	Pretend you have a rotary-dial phone through the first menu and press nothing. When second, automated voice menu starts, say "agent." Then say "yes" twice.	2 min.	First attempt ended after four minutes when an automated voice told us to call back.	Better
	U.S. Airways/America West	800-363-2542	Press 2, then 0.	1.5 min.		Better
TV	Comcast	800-266-2278	Ignore two requests to enter your phone number. Press 1 for English, then 1 for current customer. Then press 0 twice.	4 min.	Spiffy new "Virtual Hold" system lets you keep your place in line without holding.	Worse
	DirecTV	800-494-4388	Press 1 for existing customers. Ignore two requests for your phone number. Press 1 for account inquiries.	4 min.	If you try pressing 0 or # to sidestep the computer, you're disconnected.	Worse
	Dish Network	888-284-7116	Press 1 for existing customer, then press 0 at each of the next four prompts.	1.5 min.		Worse
	TiVo	877-367-8486	Say "agent." Say "agent" again, and the voice will relent, saying, "OK, agent."	2 min.		Better
UTILITIES	City of Seattle garbage	206-684-3000	Press 3, then 0.	1 min.	Automated voice promises the system has changed "to better serve you," but shortcuts are the same.	Worse
	Puget Sound Energy	888-225-5773	Press 0, ignoring "invalid response" reply. Press 0 again. Press 2. Press 0.	2 min.		Worse
	Rabanco	206-332-7777	Press 1.	1 min.	Extra points for telling people how to reach customer service right away.	Better
	Seattle City Light	206-684-3000	Press 0 four times.	4 min.		Worse
Snohomish Co. PUD	425-783-1000	Press nothing. The system assumes it's a rotary-dial phone and transfers you.	30 seconds		Better	

For more shortcuts to reach a human at 500 American companies, go to: www.gethuman.com

*A summary of performance compared to 2005, measuring hold time and how easy it is to reach a human.

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