

PRIMETIME

How to avoid annoying robocalls

Dinner is on the table and everyone is seated when the phone rings. After a mad dash to answer it, the message heard begins with the robotic voice chanting, "This is credit card services and we can lower your rate today." This scenario probably sounds familiar because robocalls have become an ever-present menace today.

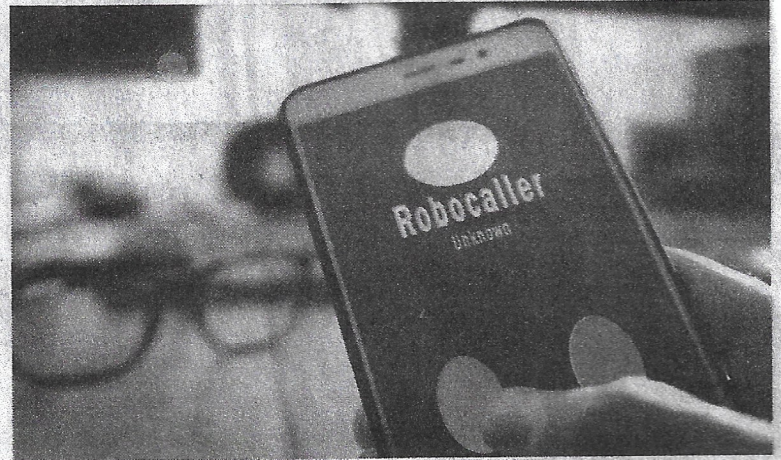
YouMail, an Irvine, California-based developer of visual voicemail and robocall blocking software, keeps statistics on robocalls and reports that 38.8 billion robocalls were placed nationwide this year as of August 2019, which equals approximately 118.1 calls per person affected.

It is also becoming more difficult to identify robocalls. The Federal Communication Commission notes that your caller ID may be showing a local area code, which can lead someone to think the call is local. However, this number is often spoofed, which means the caller is falsifying the information being sent to make it look like a local number. The recordings used are also increasingly sophisticated due to the use of software that can respond like a real person. Sometimes the recording has extra background noises like laughing or coughing to make it seem like an actual call.

Robocalls go to landlines, cellphones and even police officers. "We get robocalls at the police department," says Nikole Petersen, a 30-year veteran of the Aurora Police Department who is an investigator. "All ages fall for robocalls and sometimes they are scams."

Some steps are being taken to control these nuisance calls. In June 2019, the FCC ruled that phone companies may, as a default, block unwanted robocalls before they reach consumers. In the past, customers had to opt in for call blocking. Even with these efforts, the reality is that technology makes it easy and inexpensive for companies to place enormous amounts of robocalls that are too numerous and hard to trace.

However, there are some ways to combat this annoying army of



know the name or number on your caller ID, don't answer. This may sound simple but most people are so conditioned to answer the phone that it is hard to ignore a call. When you answer a call, even if you hang up right away, it lets the company calling know that this is a working phone number so they will try again and again. If the unknown number was really someone trying to reach you, there will most likely be a message left on your voicemail so don't answer if the name is not familiar.

Don't get caught talking with a robot: If you do answer a call and realize that it is a robocall, hang up immediately. Do not politely wait until the end of the call. Do not try to waste their time by leaving the phone off the hook. Do not push a number to opt out of future calls. The longer the phone call continues, the more likely that there will be future calls.

It is also important not to answer questions, even something simple like "hi, is this the homeowner?" "Never answer a question with yes," warns Petersen. Unscrupulous telemarketers may record your voice saying "yes" and claim you were agreeing to purchase merchandise or sign up for a service.

If the caller asks who you are or tries to identify you, don't give any information. Don't imagine that if you continue the call to talk to a live telemarketer to complain, you will be able to end the calls. Whenever you engage

National Do Not Call Registry found at donotcall.gov. Although this will not stop all robocalls, it will stop calls from legitimate telemarketers. Be sure to list all your cellphones and landlines. Sadly, not every telemarketer checks the Do Not Call Registry. In many cases, the calls are coming from other countries, which makes it very difficult to trace.

Get the app to give robocalls a zap: Talk to the phone company about call blocking tools they offer. There are also apps that you can download on mobile phones that will block robocalls. Some services have a small charge while others like YouMail are free. Most apps will allow you to add numbers to your blocked call list so if a robocall gets through, send in the number. "When you have a call blocking app, it sends a message that this is not a working number, which likely means you won't be called again," notes Petersen.

Don't fall prey to everything they say: When a call comes in from someone claiming to be from your bank, Social Security, the IRS or your utility company, be very wary. "We don't arrest people over the phone for missing jury duty," notes Petersen. "Social Security doesn't call you. You can't pay a utility bill with gift cards. These are all scams."

If you are doubtful about the authenticity of a call, Petersen suggests hanging up on the caller. Then find a legitimate number for Social Security, your bank, utility company or whatever other group the caller claimed to be representing. Call the number