

The Death of the Customer

The French literary philosopher, Roland Barthes, once announced the death of the author. This apparently shocking idea actually enfolded a quite simple one. Barthes had made the rather obvious realisation that what a work of literature *means* cannot entirely depend on what its author intended to say. In this way, the meaning of the work moved from the mind of the author to the mind of the reader, or readers. Consequently, there was no longer much point talking about authors when one talked about literary works.

I was reflecting recently on some rather harrowing telephone calls that I had made, or had tried to make, to such large companies as Sky and had come to realise that we now live in an age when, in addition to the Author, the Customer also has died. This idea may seem shocking to the likes of Sky, for they are no doubt under the impression that they have millions, if not billions of customers. But I have concluded, after close reasoning, that they have none.

Quite when there ceased to be any more Customers is hard to say, but it had something to do with the emergence of automatic telephone answering systems. The automatic telephone answering system is like the car. It is one of those ideas that must have struck the person who invented it as something of such brilliance that any temptation to consider its downsides must have been rapidly set aside, like the possibility that the beautiful lover you have found this evening might have a dose of clap. Here was a machine that had the primary virtue of any machine, that it looked as if it could replace a job. More than that, it looked as if it could replace several jobs. For while a person can normally answer only one telephone call at a time, a machine can happily manage several. With such a machine one could therefore be rid of the person, usually a woman, who slowly answers your company's calls and be rid of any future need for further women as one's successful business began to receive more and more calls.

With this first fateful step the Customer was doomed. Now, when the Customer called, what they first encountered was not a person, but a recorded voice. This voice began by appearing to welcome the Customer's call. Now, of course, this was no longer the company welcoming the Customer's call. Had the person taking the call been a person employed by the company that is different. But now, a disembodied, anonymous voice answered the call. Indeed, it was possible that if you rang another company who happened to have the same answering service, you would be answered by the same voice. From this point of view at least, you would have no idea which company you were calling.

The disembodied voice would then normally offer you a range of options. Already, the risk of misunderstanding was multiplying. This process relied on the company knowing confidently beforehand what kind of calls it was likely to get. It then needed to fit the answers permitted by the machine to this pre-selected range of call options. As most callers wished to say things that did not fit the prearranged answers waiting for them, it meant that talking to one of these machines was a little like walking onto the set of an Absurd play half way through the final act. One had no idea what was going on. But then again, out the corner of your eye you spot him, sitting in the front row of his own play. The Author. You run over and ask him what the hell is going on. But he is dead, and cannot reply.