

Next Available Operator



“Your call is important to us. Please stay on the line and the next available operator will be with you shortly.” The first time Gwen heard those words, she did as she was told: she stayed on the line. But after the phrase was repeated ten, twenty, thirty, *forty* times and her call still hadn’t been answered, she began to get frustrated. Of course, hundreds of thousands of irritated callers hear that same message every day. But there was one difference: Gwen knew where to find “the next available operator.” Her apartment was right across the street from Acme Telephony Obfuscators, the biggest call center in the Midwest. So when the cheerful recorded voice repeated its message of false hope for the *seventieth* time, Gwen swung into action. She slammed down the phone, stormed across the street, stalked pass the receptionist (who was, fittingly, also on hold), and swept into an atrium in which sat exactly twenty “available operators.” She figured they were available because not a single one was fielding a telephone call. Gwen couldn’t say what happened next – only that sometime later she found herself back in her apartment with twenty telephone headsets mangled together. ‘Hmm. Might make a nice hat,’ she thought as she rearranged the pieces into an avant-garde Easter bonnet. Then, on an impulse, she redialed the telephone number. This time it just rang, and rang ... and rang.