



# STOP THE COLD-CALLING PESTS

Frustrated by automated telephone calls? Angered by doorstep salesman? You're not alone. We reveal the true extent of the cold-calling problem – and how to solve it

Our survey of *Which?* readers found that they receive an average of one telephone cold call every week and one doorstep cold call a month. One angry reader believes the practice should be outlawed: 'Cold calling is a maddening and annoying practice. It is an invasion of privacy and destroys a person's right to come home after a hard day's work and enjoy a relaxed evening'. Another reader summed it up: 'I don't wish to be troubled by phone, at any time, by anybody. I want the right NOT to be contacted.'

Although increased competition in the gas, electricity and telecoms industry has meant that consumers can choose the cheapest suppliers, it also appears to be responsible for many cold calls. In our survey, telecoms companies made more telephone cold calls than any other sector. Electricity and gas companies were responsible for nearly a fifth of doorstep calls, more than any other industry.

Fortunately, our survey also revealed that just a few simple measures can effectively reduce the number of calls you receive.

## TELEPHONE COLD CALLS

Our study found that, on average, those who aren't registered with the Telephone Preference Service (TPS) or who aren't ex-directory receive more than 100 unsolicited calls a year (see 'Success of the TPS', opposite). But some are targeted more than others – 7 per cent of people who completed the diary received around 260 calls a year.

### Who's calling you?

Ironically, we found that the biggest cold-call culprit is the telecoms industry. As market leader, BT alone made a staggering 5 per cent of all identified cold calls in our survey. Giles Deards, Head of Media Relations at BT, told us that its customers deserve more privacy but that BT needs to check that they are happy. He said: 'We won't call

anyone who asks us not to and we explicitly give customers the option not to take further calls from us when they sign up to BT Privacy.' This is a free service that incorporates the TPS and caller display.

In joint second place in the annoyance stakes are the mobile operator 3, Anglian Home Improvements, British Gas, Homecall, Onetel and T-Mobile. Each made 2 per cent of all identified telephone calls in our study.

Two thirds of the calls received asked for someone by name, which makes it difficult to distinguish between calls you are expecting and cold calls. As Helen Drummond from Glasgow found out, it can be more traumatic when they get the name wrong. 'The calls are often for my deceased mother, which is very upsetting,' she said.

## Who's calling you?

In our survey, these industries were the worst offenders for telephone cold calls. The telecoms industry came top – BT alone made 5 per cent of calls



Based on 754 members who completed a diary. A lucky 36 per cent received no cold calls during the two weeks

## OUR RESEARCH

Our results are based on a survey of 1,033 members.

Of those, 754 completed a diary recording all telephone cold calls received over two weeks; 693 members completed a similar diary of doorstep calls received over two weeks. For the purposes of this research we defined cold calls as unsolicited calls from companies trying to sell you something, offer you a service, or get you to take part in a competition, or unsolicited fundraising calls from charities. We included calls from both unknown companies and companies you are already a customer of. Thanks to everyone who took part.

day', claiming that by then so many people will have signed up to the TPS that telephone cold calling will no longer be profitable. See 'Advice', p20.

## DOORSTEP COLD CALLS

Doorstep cold calling is less common than the phone variety, but it can be more intimidating. On average you reported receiving one visit a month, but 8 per cent received at least one a week.

## Who's knocking at your door?

British Gas takes first place for the most doorstep calls. Six per cent of all identified doorstep calls in our survey were made by the UK's largest utility provider, clearly eager to encourage more people to 'come back to British Gas'. Sian Callaghan, Corporate Affairs Manager for British Gas, told us: 'Current indicators are that the vast majority of customers appreciate, or do not object to, us calling on them, and this is supported by our sales figures.'

In fact, our survey found that utilities companies made nearly one in five unexpected knocks at the door. Southern Electric made 4 per cent of all calls. Telecoms companies again featured highly – Onetel also made 4 per cent of all doorstep calls.

## Doorstep intimidation

Just one unexpected knock at the door can be frightening. In our survey, nearly half of you admitted feeling intimidated by a doorstep seller, and a similar proportion had felt pressurised to buy. One reader told us about the experience of his 85-year-old mother: 'She was tricked into spending several thousand pounds on an electric buggy by a doorstep caller. She lives in a semi that has access only by steps at front and rear so it was obvious that it was totally unsuitable.' Luckily the delivery men had more conscience than the original seller and took the buggy back as soon as they realised it was completely inappropriate.

## Who's knocking at your door?

In our survey, these industries were the worst offenders for doorstep cold calls. Gas and electricity companies came top – British Gas alone made 6 per cent of calls

**Gas/electricity companies: 18%**

**Charities: 14%**

**Tradespeople: 16%**

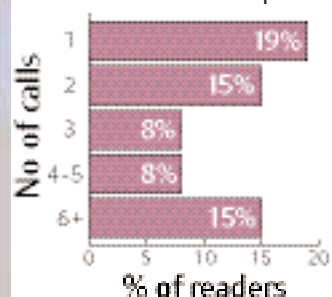
**Windows/conservatories: 10%**

**Telecoms: 7%**

Based on 231 identified calls

## How many cold calls?

The chart shows how many telephone cold calls our readers received over a two-week period.



## Silent calls

Worryingly, so-called 'silent calls' made up 29 per cent of all the calls you told us about. These are generated by automatic dialling equipment that dials more numbers than there are operators available to take them. The Direct Marketing Association's guidelines say that only 5 per cent of a company's outbound calls can be silent calls – a far smaller number than we found being made overall. If you have been troubled by silent calls, you can register your number on the Silent Callgard service on 0870 4443969. This will prevent your number being called by the big companies that use auto dialling equipment.

## Success of the TPS

The Telephone Preference Service (TPS) is a register of those numbers whose owners have chosen to opt out of receiving unsolicited sales and marketing calls. And the good news is that it works. Those of you registered with the TPS received half as many calls as those who aren't.

James Sloan in Bucks agrees: 'Before registering with the TPS last January I was getting up to ten cold calls per day and had a trace put on the line with the police because of silent callers. The TPS has stopped nearly all of these and those that get through the net go away very quickly once I say I'm registered.' Some calls do still get through because the TPS doesn't cover calls from abroad – and some companies continue to break the law.

Still, its success has the industry worried. Mike Havard is director of CM Insight, which advises companies on cold calling. At a recent industry conference he branded 1 June 2007 'cold call death



## Advice

To reduce the number of cold calls you receive...

● **Sign up to the Telephone Preference Service** Call 0845 070 0707 or visit [www.tpsonline.org.uk](http://www.tpsonline.org.uk). BT also offers a free privacy scheme, which incorporates TPS and caller display.



● **Sign up to the Silent Callgard service** if you're troubled by silent calls. Call 0870 4443969.

● **Never respond to an automated prize draw call**  
As we warned in our article 'Scams: don't get sucked in', January 2006, p10, the key to reducing the number of these calls is never to respond. Once you have positively responded (even just by asking them to call again), you may be placed on a 'suckers list' and be contacted more and more often.

● **If you would like your street to be considered as a no cold-calling zone, contact your local trading standards office**  
Details will be in the phone book.

### Doorstep selling regulations

You do have some protection if you buy something at home or on your doorstep, including a seven-day cooling-off period during which you can change your mind about a purchase. This applies only if the goods or services are worth more than £35 and you didn't invite the salesperson to call, or if the visit follows an unsolicited phone call or doorstep visit. The salesperson must inform you of this cooling-off period: failure to do so constitutes a criminal offence.

Additional protection should come from the EU's directive on unfair commercial practices, which

**'I don't wish to be troubled by phone, at any time. I want the right not to be contacted'**

Which? member

comes into force at the end of 2007. It states that sellers must leave your home if asked to, and if you've asked not to be contacted, this request should be honoured.

But we don't think these measures go far enough. Citizens Advice complained about the lack of adequate legislation to the Office of Fair Trading back in 2002. This prompted a review by the Department of Trade and Industry (DTI), but the final recommendations are yet to be published. The DTI told us that it will respond very soon. We'll keep you informed.

### Deterring doorstep sellers

The lack of consumer protection in this area has led to trading standards and the police setting up 'No cold-calling zones'. Stuart Pudney, the Trading Standards Institute's Lead Officer for Doorstep Crime, is the driving force behind the new initiative. 'We tell people that you can't distinguish crooks from anyone else, so don't do business with anyone on your doorstep,' he told us.

The first no cold-calling zone was set up two and a half years ago by Cambridgeshire County Council. Signs are placed on lampposts at the entrance to the street saying that 'uninvited salespeople' are not welcome. There are now more than 20 zones in Cambridgeshire (with up to 50 houses in each) with a further 100 being set up across the UK. BT has pledged £50,000 to help fund more zones.

According to Stuart Pudney, crime in the zones has come down significantly, especially distraction burglaries, where criminals pose as salespeople to distract the owners while others burgle the property.

### THE FUTURE

Unfortunately, the future for doorstep sellers doesn't look as bleak as it does for telephone cold callers. Richard Berry, director of industry body the Direct Selling Association, told us: 'If I were a telemarketer I'd be extremely worried. But there are advantages to buying on the doorstep. It is convenient. You have the opportunity to talk to the seller and make an informed decision. You can see a demonstration of how the product works.'

None the less, eight out of ten people in our survey felt that doorstep cold calling should be banned.

## No cold-calling zones

**Peter Dawson is the local co-ordinator for a no cold-calling zone in Trumpington, Cambridge. The zone covers two culs-de-sac and includes 28 houses.**

'A year or so ago, we had a lot of trouble with cowboy builders in our street. There are many elderly people in the area and a few of them had been ripped off by strangers knocking at the door. I was angry and decided to do something about it.

'I found out about the zones at a Neighbourhood Watch evening. From then on things moved fast and it wasn't a lot of work – trading standards gave me the funds and it was then a case of informing the residents.

'We visited each resident with a community support officer from the local police force. All the residents were delighted as most admitted that they were nervous

of cold callers. Everyone was given an information pack containing phone numbers for trading standards and the police and leaflets about their rights.

'We've given them cards to hand to cold callers that say "I do not buy at the door from uninvited salespeople", so they don't even need to open the door fully. Door stickers are also provided. And we've put signs up

on lampposts at the entrance to the culs-de-sac saying "No uninvited salespeople" and a number for trading standards.

'It is too early to really know whether it has reduced the number of uninvited visitors we receive but residents feel empowered. It's as much about educating those of us who live here as discouraging the callers from visiting.'



Peter Dawson helped set up a no cold-calling zone in his area to discourage doorstep sellers