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## Collect Calls: Demand Rises For Those Voices That Dun by Phone

### More Delinquent Debtors Mean More Jobs For Collectors; Start Off Sweet, Finish Up Stern

By **ROBIN SIDEL**

REHOBOTH, Mass.—Sitting in a small lavender room next to her kitchen, 48-year-old Donna McCarthy leans toward a microphone and says something nobody wants to hear: “Your account is currently past due.”

“This is an attempt to collect a debt,” she continues, “and any information obtained will be used for that purpose.”



*Donna McCarthy*

Given her soft voice, the voice teacher and former radio talk-show host hardly seems suited to persuading people to pay up. These days, however, business is booming for Mrs. McCarthy and others who record telephone messages that bill collectors use to pursue delinquent customers.

“We need more of them,” says Cris Bjelajac, who regularly hires Mrs. McCarthy by the hour for SoundBite Communications Inc., a Bedford, Mass., concern that provides recorded messages to banks, debt-collection companies and cellphone providers. It is now using about a dozen reliable voices to meet the demand, up from just one or two five years ago. The talent is usually paid \$100 to \$300 an hour for a job that usually can be done in an hour.

The first recorded message to a delinquent customer often comes from what sounds like a young woman who cheerily reminds that a payment is several days overdue. The messages become harsher as customers fall deeper into delinquency, with the bubbly sounding woman often being replaced by a stern male who speaks in short, declarative sentences that are aimed at creating a sense of urgency. Research shows that following up sweet talk with hard knocks is an effective formula, debt-collection executives say.

Delinquency and default rates on credit cards are within sight of those from early 2002, when credit-card companies wrote off about 7.7% of their loans. J.P. Morgan Chase & Co., the nation’s largest issuer of credit cards, has predicted that default rates could top 8% by the end of this year.

Scripts usually are based on instructions from clients, who want material that is fine-tuned to economic conditions and the exact

financial condition of their customers.

Although the female voice typically gets the consumer to listen, “more often than not, the male voice outperforms female voice” when it comes to paying up, says Ann Cannon, an executive with a firm that hires free-lancers.

A message from a recorded voice can be just the first stop on the way to making a bill payment. After confirming the identity of the customer on the line, the customer is often transferred to a call center with live operators. In other cases, recorded messages will talk a person through the whole process of making a payment.

Accents often are effective in debt collection, particularly when the recorded message is coming from someone like Orla Johannes, a 35-year-old Montreal resident who grew up in England and hasn’t lost her accent.

Since the recession hit, Ms. Johannes, has been recording two or three debt-collection messages a week, up from just two or three a month in 2007. “People like British accents because they are different,” she says. “And people tend to listen to anything that is different even if I am just saying: ‘Hey, you owe us money.’”

Mr. Bjelajac has a simpler theory about why male customers respond well to British female voices. “They think Elizabeth Hurley is on the other end,” he says.

Victor Patenaude, a partner at San Diego law firm Patenaude & Felix, which specializes in debt collections, also says he gets the best response rates from a British female voice when his company blasts out as many as 10,000 recorded messages a night to delinquent consumers in California, Nevada and Pennsylvania.

“I’ve tried Spanish male, Spanish female, Asian male, Asian female and Southern. I’ve even tried my own voice, and it didn’t work very well,” says Mr. Patenaude.

CSG Systems Inc.’s Prairie Interactive Messaging unit uses about 40 free-lancers to provide debt-collection recordings for some of the country’s biggest banks, though the company won’t say which ones. The Omaha, Neb., company often relies on Midwestern accents because they are perceived to be neutral, giving them a broad geographic reach, says Ms. Cannon, Prairie’s vice president of sales.

Dennis Preston, a linguistics professor at Oklahoma State University in Stillwater, who has studied regional accents, says many people respond best to voices and accents that sound

just like they do.

After 25 years in radio, including talk shows and commercials, Mrs. McCarthy, who goes by the name Donna Mac professionally, has been swamped with debt-collection scripts in the past six months. The day a reporter visited her home, she had just spent 20 minutes recording a debt-collection message.

Although she isn’t permitted to disclose the names of companies she records messages for, clients listed on her Web site range from American Express Co. to Verizon Wireless. SoundBite’s customers include credit-card issuers J.P. Morgan, Capital One Financial Corp. and Bank of America Corp., as well as cable-TV company Comcast Corp. and cellphone provider Sprint Nextel Corp.

Mrs. McCarthy, who has also provided voice-overs for medical instruction and retail loyalty programs, has converted her dining room to a small recording studio that includes gadgets to enhance the sound quality of her voice and a large microphone that is connected to her home computer.

She has a voice free of regionalisms that is just right for delinquent customers in the Midwest and on the West Coast.

As the recession worsens and unemployment climbs, Mrs. McCarthy has noticed that the scripts she reads have become more empathetic to delinquent customers and often provide more payment alternatives for them, especially if they’re behind on a mortgage. A popular line: “We understand it’s a difficult time.”

Mrs. McCarthy says she is sympathetic to the people who receive her messages, and hopes she sounds like a “compassionate, businesslike friend.”

“Years ago, people who owed money weren’t respected. Now, you can be a respectable person, do all the right things and still find yourself in this kind of situation,” she says

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