Begone, Vile Telephone Spam and Scams!

"Hi! This is Dave from the fulfillment department!" You probably receive calls like that every day – calls that are nothing more than scams. The problem seems to be worsening, but there's some hope.

Perhaps spam and scam calls annoy you.

Protections exist for cell phones and for most voice over IP (VOIP) systems, but land lines don't even include caller identification unless you pay extra for it. Increasingly, crooks have found ways to fool caller ID, too. I don't bother with caller ID on the landline, but it comes without additional charge on most cellular plans.

One of the more recent tricks is to have the call spoof a number in your local exchange. *Exchange* is the 3-digit number between the phone's area code and the line number. This is all defined in the North American Numbering Plan (NANP) that was defined in the 1940s by AT&T for the Bell Telephone System and is used in the United States, Canada, many Caribbean nations, and US Territories.

Phone numbers consist of country codes (1 for nations that use the NANP), a 3-digit area code (614 is one of two overlapping codes in central Ohio), a 3-digit exchange code (888 and 785 are two of many that are used in my area), and a 4-digit line or station number (0000 through 9999).

When a call to my cell phone comes from a number that begins with 1-614-785, it appears to be from a local caller. Scammers know that many people will trust what appears to be
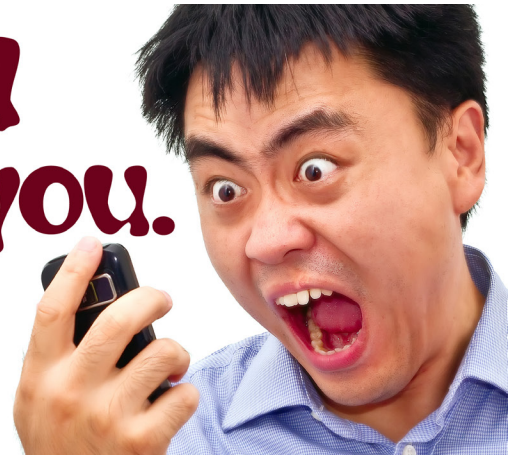
a local call even if they don't recognize the number, so they have learned how to make the call look like it's coming from a local number. The usual response to spam calls involves blocking the number, but that no longer works because the scammer can randomize the number with every call.

Several applications exist for IOS and Android phones. Some also work with voice over IP systems. None that I've found work with standard (POTS — "plain old telephone service") lines. After trying a couple of them, I signed up for the paid version of one.

A Challenge from the FTC

Both RoboKiller and NoMoRobo have won contests by the Federal Trade Commission to block unwanted calls.

RoboKiller is currently available only for Apple phones, so I had expected NoMoRobo to be the one I'd sign up for. I signed up for True-Caller, though, because NoMoRobo's performance was disappointing. If you decided to try one of these apps, be sure to download it via the Apple App Store or the Google Play Store. Downloading from the provider's website would also be safe if you're absolutely certain that you're on the developer's site.

Although I signed up for TrueCaller, I'd recommend taking a look at RoboKiller if you have an Apple phone. RoboKiller's process is designed to waste the time of spam callers who use real people. So for now I'm using True-Caller on a month-to-month basis and hoping that RoboKiller will eventually be released for Android.

Ethan Garr, vice president at TekTech Systems, RoboKiller's developer, says the company is in the process of building an Android version and expecting to launch it before April. The RoboKiller Android app "will not only block more than 100,000 spammers from ever ringing on your phone, but it will also allow users to unleash our Answer Bots on spammers. These are recordings which talk back to the spammers and waste their time."
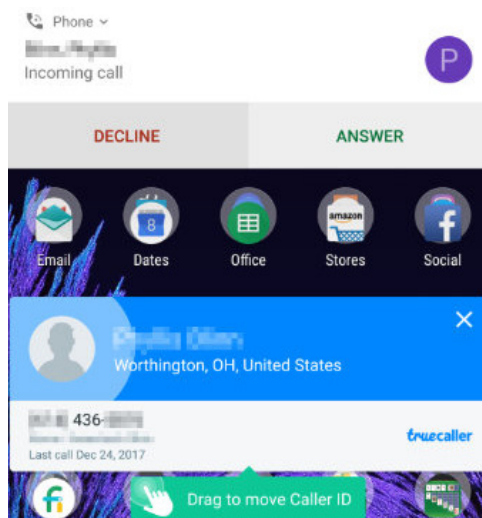
Wasting a spammer's time is important, Garr says, because the economic of cheap calls is that's driving the scourge of scam calls.

Most of the call blocker apps offer a brief trial period and then cost $2-$3 per month for continued service. The trial periods are all too short for users to develop a full understanding of how the system works.
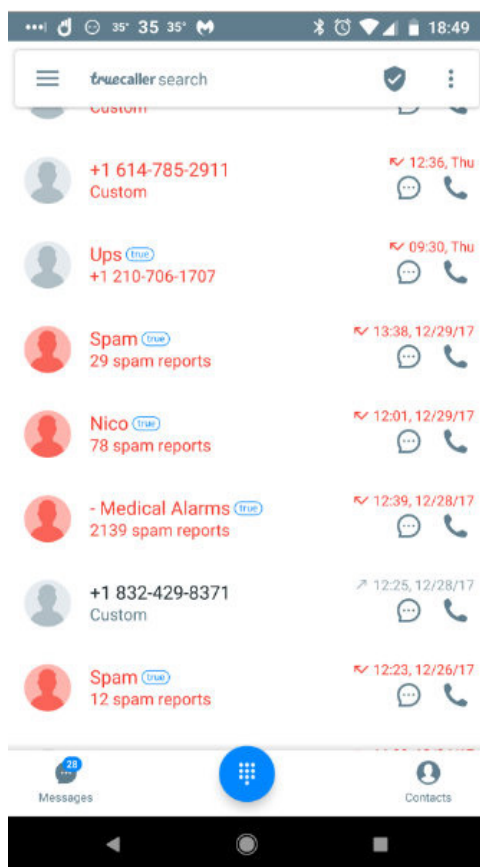
RoboKiller is the app I'm most interested in trying, but TrueCaller is a workable alternative for now. It's more of a traditional caller ID application, but it offers to block known spammers and to allow users to specify numbers they want to block.

Because I currently receive no legitimate phone calls from any user in my cell phone number's exchange, I have blocked all numbers that start with 1-614-785. That's easy to do with TrueCaller, but there is no option to selectively allow individual numbers within the blocked range. That means that if I need to receive calls from anyone in the 785 exchange, I'll have to unblock all of the numbers.

I had also looked at MrNumber. The app blocks known spam callers and allows users to report numbers that will then be added to the list of spammers. There are also options to add individual numbers you want to block, to block any call that hides the originating number, to block international calls, or to block calls from anyone not in your contact list.

TrueCaller displays a notification for inbound calls that are not automatically rejected as spam. If the caller's name it available, it will be displayed, as will the number and the date of the last call received from that number. You then have the option of accepting the call or rejecting it.

There's also a screen that shows a list of received calls, the numbers they're from, and any available identifying information. True-Caller has reduced the number of scam calls and SMS messages to my cell phone, but I'm still looking forward to seeing what RoboKiller will have to offer on an Android device.

This is a topic I'll revisit when RoboKiller has been released for Android. Until then, my recommendation is TrueCaller.

A Land Line Option

Protecting a wired phone line is more difficult and needlessly expensive because most phone companies don't provide caller ID as part of the basic service plan.

If you have an answering machine, you could simply allow all calls to be answered by the machine. At home I've been testing with a short outgoing message and I've set the machine to answer on the second ring. Most of the calls are hang-ups or recorded messages.

In the 3 weeks I've been testing this set-up, I have received exactly zero worthwhile calls, so I'm calling it a success. Ω

Last Chance for Net Neutrality

An effort exists to cast Net Neutrality in a political light, but it seems that most people, regardless of their political affiliation, reject that and prefer to have the protections offered by Net Neutrality remain in place.

You've probably heard that Net Neutrality is dead, but there's still one final option.

On February 22, the Federal Communications Commission's rule that destroys Net Neutrality under the guise of "Restoring Internet Freedom" was officially published in the Federal Register. If Net Neutrality is to be saved, it must be done within the next 60 Congressional days (days when Congress is in session).

It's easy to cast this in political terms because Net Neutrality was established during the Obama administration when Tom Wheeler was the FCC chairman and dismantled by the current FCC chairman, Ajit Pai, who was named to head the FCC by Donald Trump. Pai, however, was appointed to the FCC by Barack Obama.

Research by the University of Maryland's Program for Public Consultation shows that more than 80% of voters favor Net Neutrality, and that includes a majority of Republicans, Democrats, and independents. Simply put, the ISPs are playing the politicial card.

Net Neutrality classifies the internet as a "Title II" common carrier and thus gives the FCC the authority to pass rules that ban blocking and throttling of content as well as selling faster lanes to companies wanting to get speedier access to consumers. Supporters includ Apple co-founder Steve Wozniak, Tim Berners-Lee (widely considered to be the inventor of the Web), and virtually every company that uses the internet as part of its business operations.

Eliminating Net Neutrality could have a detrimental effect on websites operated by businesses not large enough or wealthy enough to compete with mega corporations. That's why it's important to contact your federal legislators and express support for Net Neutrality.

The clock is running and the website you save might be yours. Ω