

Meet Samantha West

A few weeks ago Michael Scherer, Washington Bureau Chief for TIME magazine, received a call on his cell phone. He described the person on the other end of this call as “a charming woman with a bright, engaging voice.” She identified herself as a representative of Premier Health Plans Inc., a purveyor of life, medical and dental insurance. She claimed that Scherer had previously requested information about health insurance from her company and that she was merely following up on his inquiry. She promised that she could get him a quote for life, health and/or dental insurance in minutes.

Scherer began to believe that there was something very fishy about this call. He had not contacted Premier Health Plans Inc., about insurance coverage or any other matter. His suspicions then focused on the voice that came over the phone. It was absolutely pitch perfect. Her goal was to ask a set of questions like: Are you retired or actively working? Are you on Medicare or Medicaid?” “Are you currently covered by health or dental insurance?”

Scherer began to suspect that he was not talking to a real person on the other line. So he asked the voice on the other end of the line some questions. When Scherer asked questions like: “What vegetable is found in tomato soup?” , the voice responded that she did not understand the question. When asked what day of the week it was yesterday, she complained of a bad connection. He asked her name. Her response: Samantha West. He asked her point blank: “Are you a robot?” Her response, complete with a chuckle, was; “I am a real person Can you hear me okay?”

The number (484) 589-5611 had appeared on Scherer’s call display. He wanted to know if Samantha West was a real person or a robotic voice. Scherer put a TIME reporter on the case. The reporter called Premier Health directly. He identified himself as a TIME reporter doing a story about a robot who calls people on Premier Health’s behalf. The company spokesperson’s response: “We don’t use robot calls, sir,” before promptly hanging up the phone. The day after the TIME story broke, the company’s website was taken off the internet. You now get a busy signal when you try the telephone number.

On the one hand, there is nothing particular sinister about this story. Most of us are familiar with this kind of technology. We have all called help lines that are answered by a recorded voice which announces: “Thank you for calling. For service in English please say “English.” For service in French say “Francais”. You say “English” into the receiver and the recordings continue in English. The voice then asks you to speak your ten digit account number into the receiver. The voice responds: “Did you say 7770006661?” If that is correct, say ‘yes.’” If you say “yes” some silence follows. The silence is broken by these words. “I’ve successfully retrieved your account. Your call will be transferred to the next available customer representative.” Your ears are then filled with music or the company’s ads played over and over again until such time as you are connected to a real person.

Samantha West’s voice was generated by a computer program that was designed to do the same thing. The program was designed to ask some simple questions and then transfer the answers and the call to a live person who would close a sale. The difference is that when we call into a company’s help line we expect the robotic telephone answering system. The calls made by the Samantha West computer program were generated by the company to unwitting consumers and the computer program was also specifically designed to make the consumer believe that they were talking to a real live person. The program evidently fooled thousands until TIME magazine let the cat out of the bag.

The company’s website once proudly declared: “We’re here to help. . . because we care.” These are the words that got me on my soapbox. How could that company possibly say that they care about people? They are using robots, not people, to make calls for them. They begin the conversation with the people they “care about” by using a ruse. The robotic voice actually claimed the unwitting consumer had

contacted the company for information about healthcare insurance. Is that caring? The fact that the company pulled their website and disconnected their telephone line overnight raises all sorts of red flags. However, as I railed against this corporation behaving badly, I was suddenly stopped in my tracks.

My thoughts turned to interactions I have had with many people. A conversation with a stranger often turned to the question: "So what you do for a living?" When I answer: "I am a pastor," more often than not, the conversation changes. It often goes cold. If I was on an airplane, my seatmate would pull out a book or magazine or plug their ear-buds into the plane's entertainment system or an I-phone. I am convinced that many of the people who broke off our conversation believed that I was a lot like Samantha West. They believed that I was a robotic voice that was programmed to ask them all the right questions so that I could sell them my productJesus. Many were convinced that I will market Jesus to them as a kind of insurance against the perils of life, most especially death. They have seen Christian websites that proudly declare: We're here to help..... because we care." They may have wondered what we really cared about. Upon reflection, they became convinced that all we care about is making a sale, that is, that they buy into Jesus and start paying premiums.

I would have loved to speak to these folks. I would have loved to remind them that they have attempted to contact my boss. They have wondered whether God really exists. They have wondered whether God loves them. They have wondered why good things happen to bad people and why bad things happen to good people. They have been confronted by death and have wondered why we have to die and what happens after death.

I would really have loved to tell them that what all Christian websites should say is: "We are here to help....because God cares." I would have told them that I am just a human being like them. I would have told them that I do not have a big heart and I do not love everyone. I would admit that I couldn't do much of anything for them but God can. I would declare that it is God who wants to reach out to them and He does so through people like me. I would declare that I did not want to fool them; it's not about me, it's about God.

I would have loved to tell them that faith in God the Father, His Son Jesus and the Holy Spirit is not like an insurance policy that protects them from life's perils or like a prudent investment that will yield health and wealth. Christians are not exempt from all of life's problems and challenges. However, God has equipped us for the challenges in life. God has given us Jesus, the Son of God, who was tempted as we are tempted, who suffered and died just as we do. Jesus endured and overcame temptation, suffering and death. Jesus gives us the strength to endure life's challenges. Sometimes we experience miracles; we are healed or a problem we encounter is resolved miraculously. However, Jesus is always with us and helps us endure life's tests. I would confess and admit that Christians often hurt other people by our thoughts, words, our actions and our failure to take action. If we listen to Him, Jesus makes us painfully aware of sin. He wants to confess our sins to Him and receive forgiveness from Him, because He suffered for our sins. He wants us to admit our sin to those we have hurt and make reparation, if we can. I would confess that the life of a Christian is a work in progress.

I would assure them that Jesus is used to rejection and that He does not take rejection personally. He is always ready to talk. He speaks through the Holy Scriptures. We are at the beginning of a new year. We all have a fresh start. Come hear God's word at a church near you. At Grace, we hear God's Word on Sundays at 9:00 AM (Contemporary) and 10:30 AM (Traditional). Sunday School is in session during the 10:30 service.

Hope to see you soon.

Pastor Ed Skutshek