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Mixed Media

My Dad absolutely detests telemarketing calls. When they'd call during family dinners, in the days before the "do not call list," he'd often get pretty hot under the collar. He was probably among the first to put his number on the list. Ironically, just a few days ago, he changed his cell phone number after receiving tons of unsolicited calls on his iPhone.

I worked a telemarketing job when I was in college. I sold magazines from a dungeon-like, dank basement office. Periodically, a man who subscribed to *Playboy* would pop up as the next call on my computerized screen. Those were the worst. It never failed that the man asked me if I was a playmate. I always wanted to say, "Yes, sir, I am a *Playboy* playmate who works as a telemarketer hocking you a magazine in my off time. And I am nude right now." Of course, I never did. I think I lasted about two weeks before I quit. A coworker told me that was the usual turnover rate. I could see why.

So I haven't decided if I'll volunteer to make some calls as part of **Matthew Dehamers'** new show at the Bemis Center, **(402) Disconnect/Reconnect**. During the show, which opens Friday, Dehamers and a team of volunteers will make one phone call to every individual listed in the Omaha white pages. It totals about 100,000 calls. The "call center" will have 10 phone lines and be in one of Bemis' galleries. Dehamers wants to turn what's normally a negative experience into a positive one. The "telemarketers" will offer a brief question or an affirming thought relating to the community during each call. Dehamers says all he's selling is Omaha.

I asked Bemis Curator Hesse McGraw if the artist planned to tape some responses, and he wasn't sure. But wouldn't it be interesting to see how many people hang up before they hear the affirming thought? I wonder how many people will "get it." I wonder how many people will think it's a prank call.

I haven't told my dad about the project, but he's a "B" in the phone book, so his call will arrive soon after the show opens March 13. I'll remind him to listen for it, and plan to ask him to save the message if it arrives during the day, when he's at work. I'll also tell my grandparents about the calls. What's funny about this project is that as I looked through an Omaha phone book last night, I realized that none of my contemporaries are listed.

We all survive on cell phones. Who has a landline these days? The generation gap adds another layer to the project. Anyhow, when they receive their calls, I'll report to you. And if I can get over my fear of *Playboy* subscribers and the memory of my dad yelling over a plate of meatloaf, I might just make a few calls myself.

— Sarah Baker

Mixed Media is a column about art. Send ideas to mixedmedia@thereader.com.

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