

# TheACTUARY

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# Frosty reception for cold-callers

IT IS A CURIOUS EXPRESSION, 'TO TAR WITH THE SAME BRUSH'. It should really be 'to brush with the same tar', since it is the tarring, and not the shared use of a brush, that is central to the expression. Or 'to tar with the same tar', but that's a bit of a tongue-twister.

The reason I am bringing up tar, so to speak, is that I wish to preempt any accusations of single-brush tarring that might otherwise ensue. I want to make it absolutely clear that what follows relates only to the 'bad' recruitment consultants, and not to the good ones. The good ones, including all those who advertise in this magazine, do a sterling job. They help you to polish your interviewing techniques, spruce up your CV, and seek to place you with a suitable employer. But the bad ones...

The bad ones all seem to have my telephone number. And they don't shy from, or have any professional qualms about, calling me up at work to try to prise me from my current job. I am always being phoned to be told that I have been recommended by an ex-colleague for a very exciting role in a growing firm with good prospects for rapid promotion to partnership. I have heard this line about 20 times, and have never worked out which ex-colleague has recommended me for all these jobs. A cynic would think it were a foot-in-the-door ploy on the part of the cold-caller.

It is difficult to know the right way to tell these people that you are not interested. You cannot simply hang up mid-sentence, in case your paths cross in later life and they bear a grudge. And you cannot show weakness, or any inclination to follow up the call with a private chat outside office hours. If you do they put you on their 'prospects' list, and phone you every six months thereafter to try again to prise you from your current job. Polite firmness is the way, if you can manage it, of the kind that is used when house-training a dog.

Some cold-callers are very inventive. One man called me after reading an editorial in this magazine:

'Hello, it's Name Withheld For Legal Reasons here, from Name Forgotten Recruitment. I am looking to fill a position in a large life insurance company, and I thought you would be perfect as it's clear from your article in this month's *Actuary* that you are an expert on mortality.'

'Well, I wouldn't say an expert', I said, modestly.



'Particularly because my article was about the rates of mortality observed in *Macbeth*. So I fear that I would not be of much use... unless this life insurance company of yours is in Baghdad?'

'I see', he said. 'Quite. But you will understand that I have to start somewhere. You wouldn't know anyone else in your office who might be interested?'

This is a great line. 'You wouldn't know anyone else in your office who might be interested?' Or, in other words, 'You wouldn't mind doing my job for me, would you, for free?' There ought to be a withering response to this, but if there is I do not know it. If any readers do, be sure to write in and share it.

The most sinister thing about cold-callers is the way they are evolving. In the past the switchboard would work out that it was dealing with a cold-caller and warn you before putting the call through. But now the callers have evolved so as to get through this filter, much in the way that chameleons have evolved so as to avoid being eaten. And so you often find that a caller's name changes when he comes through the switchboard. You are told that it's John Q Smith from UK plc on the line, so you take the call, then the blighter introduces himself as Percy H Finglesnort from AAAAAArdvark Recruitment. You ask what happened to John Q Smith, and he chuckles. 'Just a little innocent deception, you understand', he says, before inviting you to place your future career in his honest hands.

 TIMOTHY BRAMHAM