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Ding-a-lings at France Télécom

By Keith Spicer

PARIS. The French, we know, adore talking. Heck, they invented wit, flirting and literary salons, *non*? But the telephone overwhelms them. Within 100 meters of each other and my apartment, two addresses sum up this disconnection between titillation and technology.

At 27 rue de Fleurus is Gertrude Stein's famous apartment, hangout of *literati* (and even writers, like Hemingway) of the '30s, '40s and '50s. And in the courtyard of the Institut Catholique at 21 rue d'Assas you can see where Édouard Branly in 1891 invented the "wireless telegraph" – precursor of today's cell phones.

All of which surges to mind when I digest my nearly 11 years with France Télécom, state-dominated "historic" telephone company. To be fair: FT has been grappling, like everybody, with an alphabet-soup of technologies Branly never imagined: ISDN, ADSL, FTTH, FTTB, AONs, PONs, EFM, IEEE 802.3ah -- the constant one being HELL. Besides, who cares about acronyms when you just want to order Indian food or dally *à distance* with a lover?

But FT has a record of doing what's fun for engineers, and to HELL with customers. The worst betrayal of clients, especially youth, was FT's long, late-'90s rearguard battle to derail the Internet. The public reason: to protect the \$1.2 billion Can. in revenues from FT's handy-in-its-time Minitel – a closed, bill-collecting cash-cow for FT. Apart from train schedules and students' rankings, half of this revenue (marginal in FT's budget) came from sex ads. FT – and the state – living off the avails?

The real reason for protecting Minitel via sky-high Internet dial-up rates was FT engineers' pride -- plus a deep suspicion of the U.S. FT's president once denounced a visiting Canadian telecom regulator as "an agent of the Pentagon" for talking up the Internet – "we all know the Internet came from the American Defense Department."

But I digress. The nastiest story is what FT routinely does to its clients. First, if you are an *internaute*, you will deal with three companies, all really the same: France Télécom, Orange and Wanadoo. The old FT shell-game: you call one, and they send you to two others. Same game between sales and "service" – endless phone-tag, with nobody aware or responsible.

Another trick: FT re-assigns cancelled phone numbers after six months. First, FT gave me a deceased number for the Pitié-Salpêtrière hospital where Princess Diana died. For two years I fielded medical calls -- proudly without losing a single patient. Next FT gave me the after-sales service number of Darty, a massive Canadian-Tire-style chain. I got to offer invaluable advice on fixing refrigerators.

Next up (on my fax line) was a restaurant chain called Chez Clément. I always recommended the chicken, pork and beef rotisserie, rounded off with all-you-can-eat, chocolate-and-cream *profiteroles*. My least happy wrong number (one digit off) has been the Cétélem consumer-credit bank: seven out of 10 of my incoming calls for the past four years made me financial adviser to profligate households – a bartender serving drunks. I got my counsel down to two seconds: “Dial 41, not 42.”

Spotting a new low-cost FT “triple-play” offer of phone, Internet and TV, I leapt at the bargain. Alas, the “LiveBox” high-speed modem tying it all together quickly became a DeadBox. I had to visit the sales office 12 [*sic*] times to straighten out trivial details. FT technicians were mostly subcontractors with little clue how this new stuff works. All four gave up, confessing FT’s chaos and/or incompetence. But they were aces at billing: almost \$300 for onsite visits, plus hours on the “help” line at 51 cents a minute.

FT kept me in line, if not online. They cut off my secure Internet (for e-mail, banking and free Internet calls) for six weeks. They killed my phones for three weeks. FT’s advice: “Look in the phonebook for a technician. We don’t know of anybody to help you.”

Aching for technology that worked, I fell for a snazzy new cell phone from Orange (FT), thinking they couldn’t mess that up. It works, but with 48 hours of battery-time, not the advertised 250 hours. Nearly all the cell messages I get are from Orange... trying to sell me more lame-duck-à-*l’orange*.

Thank God, I told FT *not* to put a recording on my old Cétélem number referring borrowers to my new number. Uh-oh, they forgot: unwanted calls pursued me. But FT said they really would fix it if I sent them a fax. Pity again: they destroyed my fax line. But I found one at my new (permanent?) triple-play home: the cyber-café beside Gertrude Stein’s apartment.

One FT guy, hearing my odyssey, offered consolation: “Well, all this has made you a well-informed client.” Indeed. “Besides, the other phone companies are awful too.” Then, perhaps coining FT’s next marketing slogan, he bragged, “but we’re the least awful.”