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SOAPBOX

SOAPBOX; Right Exchange, Wrong Number

By Deborah Skolnik

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IT was 9 a.m. on President's Day, the morning after the blizzard. My husband and I were hibernating under layers of quilts, which seemed like the thing to do, since the snowdrifts had grown so steep that we couldn't even open our porch door.

Then the phone rang, as I'd known it would. I was willing to bet my morning bagel that I knew the three-word greeting awaiting me. I wasn't disappointed.

"Are you open?" the caller asked.

"Well, my husband is going to shovel the driveway soon," I assured her.

"But," I chuckled, after savoring the confused silence on the other end, "this isn't the Wiz."

It's been this way since we moved into our cozy cape colonial in Scarsdale last April, and were randomly assigned a phone number that begins with the prestigious Greenburgh exchange. "Oh, you got a four-seven-two," a neighbor said wistfully as we exchanged phone numbers. She had moved to town several years ago, she said, but the phone company had given her the standard carpetbaggers' 722 prefix.

As word of our lucky number spread among other recent transplants, my husband and I became objects of envy. Imagine that, us! Our Buick may be a humble '93; our Jennifer Convertible a well-worn '96, but our phone number opens with the imperial 472. Why had fortune smiled?

Over the next few weeks, the answer revealed itself in so many words -- actually, just three, posed by callers night and day, "Are you open?"

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It didn't take a whiz of Wiz to realize our phone number was probably a cast-off, discarded by a frustrated old-timer when he discovered it was a digit off from the electronics store's. A subset of callers asked about elliptical machines, revealing our number's similarity to that of a New York Sports Club as well.

By virtue of the volume of calls we have received, we have developed keen radar for determining who is calling about what. The Sports Club members, or Sporties, possess booming voices bespeaking robust cardiovascular health.

The Wiznerds, as we call them, speak in the skittish tones of people who are aware they're about to stroll into a store looking for a blank videotape and succumb instead to the temptation of a jumbo plasma television.

We thought about changing numbers. But lose our prefix? It's like being a Jet from "West Wide Story," or, perhaps more accurately, an early 21st century Democrat. We're proud, and hanging tough. Besides, having spent my childhood in Westchester, where business and residential numbers are intertwined, I learned early on to take wrong numbers in stride. My parents' phone was similar to that of a long-defunct mystical store in Scarsdale village that sold pipes in the back -- and, it was rumored, something special to put in them. Some of my earliest telephone experiences, back in the mid-1970's, involved fielding calls from teenagers asking, "Got any stuff?"

I do now. And I've discovered that it's lots of fun trying to unload it on unsuspecting strangers. "I've got a stereo I can sell you," I tell the Wiznerds. "My 2-year-old daughter put grape jelly in one of the CD trays, and now everything I put in it sounds weird, like the Beatles' song 'I'm So Tired' played backward you know, PAAUUL IS DEAADD. Interested?"

The Sporties get a spiel when the grass is tall. "We have an exercise machine called a 'mower,'" I gush. "It's out front. Why don't you push it around for a while instead of pounding on a treadmill, like a rat in a lab? Just for today, I'll waive the initiation fee!" I've had no takers for either proposal, though not for lack of trying.

My husband, T.P., an electronics buff and Good Samaritan, has taken to providing customer service to the Wiznerds. When a woman phoned who said she was seeking a tape recorder for her Spanish lessons, I let my husband take over. "Are we talking microcassette?" T.P. asked, settling into the Jennifer Convertible. "Do you need a radio tuner as well?"

Within minutes, he had directed her to the perfect recorder, which he had spotted the previous week -- at Best Buy. He wasn't trying to wreak revenge on the Wiz. It's simply that, like Kris Kringle in "Miracle on 34th Street," my good-hearted guy believes that each customer should be directed to the best place for her needs.

Stores' inventories shift continually, and Westchester, it seems, always has an ample supply of the confused, the uninformed and the dial-pad-impaired in stock. If you're among them, give us a call. We're open anytime.

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