



The Ranks of Winners

Michela Murgia

They run things here the way the Swiss would organize a gulag. Twelve hours a day straight, divided into three shifts of four hours each. There are no breaks.

The office is minuscule, and the combat stations are about the size of an elementary-school desk. They're separated from one another with sheets of plywood and come complete with a view of a wall and a computer screen. The walls all sport motivational posters; no cubicle is complete without them. ("The operator who books the most appointments wins a cheese sampler [gross value €8.50].")

Something tells me that the word "gross" in this place doesn't just mean the opposite of "net." I can already smell blood in the air.

The average phone rep is around twenty-five, and the average educational level is low.

The most disturbing person here is the head operator. (There are actually two, but you can tell one of them isn't in charge of a damn thing.) For the sake of convenience, let's call her Hermann. Hermann isn't here just to work. Not hardly. She's a true believer. She's not merely a team player; she's a convert.

I assume my position as just one more sheep in the flock. This is going to be great.

The Sales Call / How to Shaft the Unsuspecting Housewife

The sales call has been analyzed down to its last detail. They hand me a script along with some instructions.

"Smile. The person on the other end of the line can tell. If you need to ask a question that isn't in the script, make sure it never begins with a 'don't' or other negative word and that the answer can never be 'no.' Otherwise, you're just standing in your own way."

Introducing Michela Murgia

Michela Murgia's novel *Il mondo deve sapere* (The world must be told) began as a blog in 2006 when Murgia took a telemarketing job at Kirby, the Italian affiliate of the American vacuum cleaner manufacturer. For Murgia, documenting her experiences in the Kirby call center was not an attempt to create literature; it was, instead, as Murgia says in the afterword to the most recent edition of her book, "an exorcism." The blog's wide following brought Murgia to the attention of a publisher, and the resulting novel was adapted by director Paolo Virzì into the 2008 film *Tutta la Vita Davanti* (Your whole life ahead of you), which enjoyed enormous success with the public and won several major Italian film awards.

The popularity of both book and film made Murgia the unofficial spokesperson for "Generation 1000 Euros"—an entire generation of young Italians who, even with university degrees under their belts, frequently spend ten or more of their first working years in unpaid internships (euphemistically called "résumé building"), temporary jobs with short-term "at-will" contracts and low-paid work unofficially capped at €1,000 a month. According to the Italian National Statistical Institute, by the way, the average annual salary in Italy today is just under €18,000, with a striking spread of some €10,000 between the highest average salaries in the country's north and the lowest average salaries in the south.

The tone of *Il mondo deve sapere* is ironic, self-deprecating, and colloquial—right up until Murgia's afterword, a brief but biting political exegesis on the mutation of Italian life and culture in the aftermath of labor reforms enacted by Silvio Berlusconi's union-busting, privatizing, center-right coalition, which governed nearly without interruption between 2001 and 2011. This radical transformation of working life, along with the economic crisis that deepened during the last half of that period, gave birth to a new working reality: *precarietà* (usually translated as "job instability," though the government preferred to refer to those in this category as "flexible workers").

After *Il mondo deve sapere* was published, Murgia appeared on a talk show to discuss the "new" realities of work in Italy. She was shouted down by a Berlusconi-affiliated politician, who insisted Italians had to stop acting as though the "requirements of industry could be expected to bend to meet the needs of individuals." Murgia recalls her astonishment at the "meek resignation" of the show's host, the union leaders, and the center-left politicians on the dais, all of whom remained silent. "It was as if the statement they had heard was an obvious truth: in the way our society is constructed today, human lives are nothing more than accessories to production."

In this excerpt, Murgia's protagonist describes her first days at the Kirby call center. —Wendell Ricketts

Get it? In other words, the women you're calling are idiots.

"Good morning, ma'am. My name is Camilla de Camillis from the Kirby Company in Duckburg. You don't know me, but let me tell you right away why I'm calling. You have been selected from among all the residents there in Whoville to receive a complete and <emphasis> *entirely free* <quickly> hygiene treatment <the woman should never have any clear idea what you're actually offering> for a couch, carpet, or even a mattress in your home. All you need to do in exchange for this service is simply give us your opinion about the household appliance that we'd like to demonstrate to you and about the consultant who provides your treatment. Which would be better for you, ma'am, tomorrow at 3:00 or the day after at 6:00?"

Diabolical. The housewife doesn't stand a chance. There are even standard answers for any objection she might try to make.

"I don't have time."

"Ma'am, the appointment lasts *nolonger-than*an hour, *hour-and-a-half*at most." (The comma after "an hour" must be pronounced so the woman on the phone understands that the appointment will only take an hour of her time, when it'll actually be closer to two.)

"I'm not going to buy anything."

"Ma'am, there is nothing at all to buy because we are not sending a salesman. This is exclusively a publicity campaign, and we're able to offer you this service for free."

As if the goal of a publicity campaign weren't to sell something. . . . Sure, no one's going to put a gun to her head, but after a nearly two-hour flimflam, the housewife is inevitably going to ask, "So how much does this thing cost?"

Hard to believe, but the system actually works. Any number of unsuspecting housewives, interrupted in the middle of their daily labors, have no way to resist the teledbulldozer and say yes, even if it's only so they can get off the phone.

Some of them are wise to the game, though, and keep saying no, no matter what the phone rep tries. In those cases, there's always emotional blackmail.

"Listen, I'm not interested in the least."

"Ma'am, you'd be giving us the chance to work because the company <emphasis> *only* pays us <emphasis> *young people* to arrange demonstrations of their appliances. If you would allow us into your home, you'd be helping to create jobs for us and in exchange all we ask is your honest opinion. How about Wednesday at 1:00 a.m.? Or would Saturday morning at dawn work better for you?"

At that point, even the hardest heart begins to melt. What mom would fail to be moved by the plight of a poor, jobless young person who's only getting paid to do publicity? "Yes" is right around the corner. Smile. The woman at the other end of the line can tell.

Sigmund and Me / Heck Yeah, I'm Doing This for the Money!

I'm making phone calls like a machine gunner. About a hundred in four hours. The goal for someone brand new, like me, is just three appointments, but that's too narrow a target. I'm making double that, sometimes triple.

The day of our first "motivational" meeting with the psychologist rolls around. Let's call her Sigmund. Sigmund shows up unannounced on the telephone floor and sits on the edge of a desk. Everything seems very friendly and informal.

It doesn't take me long to figure out that someone's about to be verbally sodomized.

"Ladies, why are you doing this job?" she begins. "What motivates you to be here?"

Hmm. You don't need to be a psychologist to understand that a question like that implies only one thing: crisis. The reps must have fallen behind in their appointment quotas.

People call out a series of random answers. Some say they need the money. Others don't want to be doing any other kind of work (a real job, for example). I was hoping for something a little more substantial—recitations of the Kirby articles of faith, perhaps, or confessions along the lines of "Ever since I was a little girl, I've

People call out a series of random answers. Some say they need the money. Others don't want to be doing any other kind of work (a real job, for example).

dreamed of selling vacuum cleaners over the phone!"

I wait for her to get to me, but she clearly thinks it's wiser to leave the new girl out of it. That's a smart move, but it's too bad. I was hoping for a chance to bare my fangs.

"So, you're doing this for the money," Sigmund sums up. "In other words, if someone offered you a different job for four hours a day but paid you twice as much, you'd leave?"

Fuck yeah!

But no one says it. They all have noble reasons for staying. The other girls are so nice, the boss is such a sweetheart, I really like it here, we're like one big family. Some things are priceless. For everything else there's MasterCard.

Prizes and "Gross" Incentives, Part 1

If you want to understand "marketing-oriented" psychology, there's one fundamental factor to keep in mind: production incentives in the form of merit-based prizes.

Every wall in the room is covered with charming inducements to smash records. Anyone who follows their suggestions can earn prizes, almost always in cash. But there's more. They're giving away trips, too. There are dozens of these prizes, and they're updated constantly. Some of them are truly impressive.

All of which makes me think there must be an enormous profit margin on every Kirby sold. Otherwise, there's no way to explain where they're getting all this money from. Or, for that matter, how a place like this can survive solely on the basis of sales.

The base pay we receive, in fact, is seriously low. It's barely enough to cover the cost of the gas it takes to get to the office.* In addition to the base pay, phone reps receive an incentive of five euros for every "solid" appointment. (That doesn't just mean *booked*. The sales consultant actually has to get inside the house. If our upstanding housewife sees the error of her ways and refuses to open the door, the appointment isn't a "solid" and the phone rep doesn't get paid.)

There are all kinds of other prizes, too, usually money, for reps who make the most "solids" in a month or a day or the one who books the most appointments during "prime-time" evening

In other words, if you earn a lot, the reason is our generosity in rewarding winners; if you earn a little, it's your fault because you're a loser.

hours, which is the toughest sell. Every time we sit down at our cubicles, Hermann reminds us of all these possibilities. If a phone rep books an average of five appointments a day and if at least a third of them become "solids," she could earn €700 a month.

That's pretty impressive for twenty-four hours a week.

Of course, that's if you don't take into consideration that we're working under the deadly "per-project contract" invented by the Berlusconi government during its reform of labor laws in 2003. The "PerProCon" transformed denials of the most minimal workers' rights, the ones that years of union struggles had achieved (back when unions still meant something), into fair and legal working conditions: no vacation, no paid sick leave, no annual bonuses, and the worker contributes a full one-third of payroll taxes. So when all is said and done, if you get sick, it's your ass; it's also your ass if you have to miss work for some other reason, and if you end up pregnant, please see that you get through the whole gestation thing in a maximum of two months or else you'll lose your job with a seven-day notice and no possibility of parole.

If you think about it, for twenty-four hours a week, that's pretty impressive, too.

The World's Oldest (and Newest) Professions

The weekly ritual of the motivational meeting comes to a close, another huge success. High Priest BigBoss, affable and wise in his cream-colored corduroy suit, has just given a prize to the best telefucker of the month, the girl who has demonstrated her deep understanding of telephone salestitution and who has, in full possession of her faculties, doggedly pursued the Company Abjectives (no, that's no typo). Two hundred and fifty euros in prize money for having the largest number of "solids" in a month—

* *Translator's note:* At the time, gas in Italy cost roughly the equivalent of \$8.00 per gallon. Today it's closer to \$9.00.

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Michela Murgia (www.michelamurgia.com) was born in 1972 in Cabras and is currently a ProgRes candidate in regional elections in Sardinia. She has published six books, including *Il mondo deve sapere*, a tragicomic novel of life as a telemarketer, which inspired the Paolo Virzi film *Tutta la vita davanti*. Murgia has won numerous literary prizes, such as the 2010 Premio Campiello for *Accabadora* (2009). In 2012 she co-founded the Sardinian cultural foundation Liberos.

Wendell Ricketts is the editor of *Everything I Have Is Blue: Short Fiction by Working-Class Men about More-or-Less Gay Life*, and his fiction has appeared in *Mississippi Review*, *Salt Hill*, *Blue Mesa Review*, and *The Long Story*, among others. He holds a degree in creative writing from the University of New Mexico and has worked as a translator from Italian since 1998; his translation of the plays of Natalia Ginzburg, *The Wrong Door*, was published by the University of Toronto Press.

nearly a hundred. Add that to her base pay and the bonus for every appointment booked, and it's close to €1,000.

Obviously, there are gals here who barely take home €350 a month for their four hours a day, but if anyone dared to bring it up, I imagine the response would be that the fault was theirs and not Kirby's. In other words, if you earn a lot, the reason is our generosity in rewarding winners; if you earn a little, it's your fault because you're a loser.

The best moment was when they interviewed the newest phone rep, one of ten who arrived the month after me.

"So how are things going, Penny?"

"Good, I think. I mean, I've only been here two days. But people told me such awful things about this place. . . ."

"Really? Do you know someone who used to work here?"

"Yes . . . for three months."

"I don't want to know her name." (I'll bet you don't. Two hundred of these women have passed through here in the last year; you wouldn't remember her anyway.) "But my guess is that now she doesn't have a job or, if she does, she's working as a cashier or a waitress, because people like that don't have any real desire to work. When they turn forty, they're still figuring out what they want to do in life."

See what I mean, Pretty Penny?

If your friend beat it out of here after three months, it's because she was a loser in a job that's meant for winners. Now that she's quit telephone salestitution, she's surely doing something degrading like being a waitress or a cashier or, why not say it, a whore. If this really were a religion, at this point I bet we'd be talking about heresy and excommunication.

If the women who witnessed this surreal conversation fell for the entire act, it goes without saying that a future as a cashier would mean shipwrecking the entire project of female self-actualization and that the prospect of a waitressing job would constitute professional disgrace in its most concrete form. A little less so, maybe, for anyone who ends up a whore. That's a job you can really put your heart into.

*Translation from the Italian
By Wendell Ricketts*