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## Kenneth L. Evers Memoir

**EV27. Evers, Kenneth L.** (1927-1996)

Interview and memoir

1 tape, 45 mins., 14 pp.

### TELEPHONE PROJECT

Evers discusses his career with the Illinois Bell Telephone Company, work as a commercial manager, changes in technology and service, disaster and emergency situations, the company's relationship with the community, preparing the telecommunication system for Southern Illinois University at Edwardsville, and reaction of the community to the university.

Interview by Jerry Veach, 1973

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## Preface

This manuscript is the product of a tape recorded interview conducted by Jerry Veach for the Oral History Office on February 22, 1973. Rosalyn Bones transcribed the tapes and Linda Jett edited the transcript.

Mr. Kenneth Evers discusses his career with the telephone company, the technological advances and changes of the company, and emergency phone situations.

Readers of the oral history memoir should bear in mind that it is a transcript of the spoken word, and that the interviewer, narrator and editor sought to preserve the informal, conversational style that is inherent in such historical sources. Sangamon State University is not responsible for the factual accuracy of the memoir, nor for views expressed therein; these are for the reader to judge.

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Kenneth L. Evers, February 22, 1973, Edwardsville, Illinois.

Jerry Veach, Interviewer.

Q: Ken, would you tell me, what does a commercial manager do?

A: Well, Jerry, a commercial telephone company manager really is the customer's advocate. I don't think many people realize this. I sort of take the customer's point of view when he has a particular problem on facilities or billing or anything unusual that might happen. I, in reality, take the customer's side of this particular problem and really badger the rest of my co-workers to make sure that this problem is solved to a customer's satisfaction. In addition, I guess that a commercial manager really is labeled Mr. Telephone Company. I take care of the majority of the public relations activities of the company and what most people don't realize is that we probably are the largest corporation in the state and by and large, people look at big companies and big operations with disdain . . . and we try to run our local offices as local businesses. We try to act the part of a local citizen, a local business leader. We are concerned about our particular community and just take as much interest in our civic and local government, our schools, as much interest as the fellow that's running the auto dealership or the little gift shop down the street.

Q: Well, Ken, you're very active in community affairs . . . first . . . how long have you been in Edwardsville?

A: Well, I arrived in Edwardsville in 1956. Interestingly enough, Edwardsville was still a manually operated telephone company at that time. And interestingly enough, with all the technology that I have seen in my years with Illinois Bell, I'll have to be the first to admit that the service today, although it is instantaneous, really isn't quite as personal as it used to be.

Q: You feel it was somewhat of a loss with the advent of the dial and the touch tone and the . . .

A: Oh, I would say yes, but I'm at that age where I appreciate nostalgia, Jerry. I can even see again our modern day employees. You know, years ago you would go into what we called an operating room where all these switchboard operators are located, and they really were the pulse of the community. And of course, the most informed people of the community, too. And it was very interesting that if I happened to be detained away from my office, that I might be in the bank president's office and she would readily intercept my calls and transfer them for me. This is the sort of thing you lose out on when you get so technical in your equipment.

Q: Well, Ken, when did you join Illinois Bell? When did you first start working for the company and where?

A: I started with Illinois Bell in 1945 in Chicago, carrying intercompany mail in the loop offices. I know my father had a hard time convincing me that I had to quit my sixty dollar a week job as assistant manager of a grocery chain store to take a job with Illinois Bell for eighty dollars a month. But 28 years later, I can see the wisdom in his pressuring me into going with a company that possibly could offer a better future for me.

Q: Well, did you hold various department jobs or . . .

A: I started out carrying mail. I then went into what we called our central office where we do the wiring that connects the outside cable to our switchboards. I then went on to the test desk. This is a piece of equipment used to test all the wiring of newly installed telephones in homes. From there I went into what we call our assignment department. When people order telephone service, this particular department assigns telephone numbers and the cable in which the telephone is going to work and assign central office equipment. From there I went into the installation department and installed telephones. This was all in the Chicago area. I later transferred to the marketing department. Of course, in those days we weren't as exotic as we are today, and we merely called it sales department in Rock Island. And I progressed through the sales department until I became a sales supervisor in Cicero, Illinois, and it was from Cicero that I moved to my present post as manager in Edwardsville.

Q: In 1956?

A: In 1956.

Q: You held a variety of jobs and one of the things I think that was interesting, the manager becoming Mr. Telephone Company in the community. Just how deeply are you involved in community affairs?

A: I guess when one starts his activity and community affairs you basically go with most of your fund drives, your heart fund drives, United Fund. I got involved in Chamber of Commerce work. Of course, I was a member representing Illinois Bell. I served on the Board of Directors for some six to eight years. I served as its treasurer and eventually served as president. I'm a member of the Rotary Club. Rotary is extremely active in our community. I've been in Rotary better than fifteen years now, and have served Rotary as its president and most recently was elected district governor of Rotary International, which covers a large portion of the state of Illinois. I worked on the city planning commission. Of course, in a community of our size, we have part-time governments so therefore it requires the understanding and the patience and the time of most of the businessmen to help those that have the courage to run for office. You get involved with county officials. We're the county seat. And you also get very involved with the state officials basically because of the fact that we are a regulative monopoly and we're very concerned with the fact that we cannot arbitrarily change you rates, we cannot arbitrarily set a rate of return. Everytime we want to do something along those lines, it requires filing

with the Illinois Commerce Commission, long arduous hearings, and we just have to keep in tune. Because more people than not want to make public utilities a political football.

Q: You look on the company I guess, a view of the company then, that this is the part of the job, not just a pasttime or something you do on the side.

A: Oh, no, I think it's an integral part of my job. I know that many times I would like to be able to say at five o'clock I can shut off the fact that I'm Bell Telephone, but unfortunately, I carry that title with me wherever I go.

Q: Yes. And you also do volunteer speaking which is, I guess, kind of a hobby and you've spoken in various clubs and organizations all over this part of the state. How many speeches have you made on behalf, more or less, of the company over the years?

A: Jerry, I lost track after two hundred talks. I should think I'm in the neighborhood of three hundred plus talks to civic clubs, schools throughout central and southern Illinois. Most of it, of course, is on your time, but it is very rewarding. I think it is a remarkable tool to help you grow and understand your school system, your city governments. I've learned a lot about Mt. Vernon, for instance, just speaking before the Garden Club in Mt. Vernon, the Lion's Club, the Optimist Club. Getting to know people throughout the state. I find it a fascinating hobby. I guess I never thought of it as a hobby, but it is probably a good category for it.

Q: This area, in the many years you've been here has changed I'm sure, and you're very familiar with the east side complex, the whole east side area. By east side I mean eastern portion of the Mississippi River just across, generally, from the St. Louis metropolitan complex. How has this changed?

A: Well, not as rapidly as I would have like to have seen it change. I, of course, was born and raised in Chicago. I look at the St. Louis metropolitan area and I see the massive growth, but all to the western side of the city of St. Louis. And then here of late, I guess I've become a true native of Illinois because I get a little irritated with the St. Louis television stations that really refer to the people in Illinois as the east side. I think that we've got a Berlin Wall but we call it the Mississippi River. Everytime there are rapes, murders, fires, we're on the news and we're quoted as "It happened on the east side." But when we talk about achievements and accomplishments such as our great Mississippi River festival where we host people like Van Cliburn in our cornfields, then they affectionately refer to us as, "Part of the greater metropolitan area." But I see a great potential for growth in this area. We have a lot of virgin ground and very fortunately, most of us here in Illinois still have the comforts of small communities and yet we have the access to a city as big as St. Louis without all of its problems.

Q: Yes. The Southern Illinois University came here in 19 . . .

A: Well, it's been with us ten years now, Jerry.

Q: Ten years, so it would be 1962, 1963.

A: Yes.

Q: And I'm sure you were involved, at least saw part of that happen. What do you remember about the beginnings of SIU here?

A: I remember that the rumors that arrived about this university that was going to come to pass, I remember that many farm families were going to be evicted from their homes that they held for generations. I remember sitting in a farm house where now stands the general administration building of the university, signing a contract for the first telephone line to go in for Southern Illinois University. I remember the shotguns and cannons lined up on the farm house porches ready to blast anybody that was ready to come and serve papers that they were going to lose their homes.

Q: Shotguns and cannons?

A: Oh yes, oh yes. Why, didn't you know, Jerry, that one day they were surveying and taking aerial surveys and one of our local farmers shot down a helicopter because they were infringing on his rights and scaring his thoroughbred horses? We had quite a dilemma in the early stages of the settlement of Southern Illinois University.

Q: This Southern University has since become a fixture in the community, I guess. How is it accepted now?

A: Well, I would imagine fairly well. The president of Southern Illinois University, Edwardsville, was John Rendleman. I can remember John was the attorney for the university when they were making land acquisitions and I'm sure that Edwardsville is no different than any other university town or any community that has a military encampment. We're glad to have them but then we wonder if it's really worthwhile. Of course, I'm speaking as a community, not as an individual. But I find that things are working out very . . . and we're better equipped with fire protection because of the university. We have a complete working relationship with the university police and our city policemen. There are so many advantages. The cultural improvements for this community couldn't be counted. As I said, how many other communities of our size can host Van Cliburn?

Q: Yes. So, Edwardsville has always been a center of history in many, many ways and you know quite a little bit about some of that. Tell me what you know about Edwardsville, some of the history of it, some of the things the telephone company of this community or . . .

A: Well, Edwardsville is the third oldest city in the state of Illinois. It's named after the first lieutenant governor of the state of Illinois, Ninian Edwards. We have provided the state with, I believe, with three governors. I laughingly said, because I am not a native of Edwardsville, that Edwardsville in reality and with its attitude could easily be counted as the fourteenth original colony. I know that it is rich in history and in my dealings with interviews and discussions with business leaders and community leaders throughout the state it wasn't until I'd left Edwardsville and were talking to other businessmen that I found that Edwardsville was labeled as the Silk Stocking Town of southern Illinois.

There has always been a vast amount of wealth in the Edwardsville area due to large landholders, I guess, because it was a county seat. Edwardsville as far as I can determine from studying its history, really has never been seriously affected by the national economy. That is to say, when there was economic boom elsewhere in the world, Edwardsville just plodded along at the same growth rate. But by the same token, when there was severe depression elsewhere in the nation, Edwardsville, I think, survived better than most. It always had a very progressive school system, one of the first school systems to integrate, by the way. And interestingly enough, the black population boost of an aristocracy going back five and six generations as well as the white.

Q: In Edwardsville?

A: Yes, sir.

Q: That's interesting because the smaller communities here in the--I won't use the term greater metropolitan area, but . . .

A: Please don't.

Q: I won't. Living in the shadow, as it were, of the booming suburb kind of thrush of going west out of St. Louis and now to some extent east, many of the communities here have managed somehow to maintain an identity and an attitude of pride and, well, generally an identity that . . . why is this? I know we have Edwardsville, we have Maryville, Caseyville, Glencarbon, Troy, they're all remaining, you know, real places rather than just being subdued by or buried under the growth patterns.

A: Well, Jerry, I think when you stop to look at, especially southern Illinois, you'll find as you travel from one community to another that there might be one, two, possibly three industries that pretty well support that particular community. Edwardsville is rather unique in that we would classify it as a--quote--"Bedroom community." The biggest industry that we know or that we have is Southern Illinois University. And interesting enough, going back to my arrival in Edwardsville, SIU at that time, was the largest employer. So, you see, we've had no real big influence of any big business in the community. Most of the business houses are privately owned, we have no major department stores in our community, we have a catalog store of one or two of the largest chain stores in the nation but by and large, this is a community made up of small family owned businesses. And it is a physically attractive community, it is clean, well-run, and well-maintained, with an outstanding school system. Therefore, we draw a lot of the, I guess you'd say, management personnel of all the main industries around us. Such as we have a lot of people from Shell Oil, Clark Refineries, the steel mills in Granite City, Union Starch, most of their administrative personnel reside in the Edwardsville area.

Q: The business office in the telephone company is of interest and . . . What goes on in a business office? Tell me, what do they do in a business office as such?

A: Well, it's interesting that you ask. We're still trying to maintain a personal relationship with our subscribers. And I assure you, it's getting

more, exceedingly more difficult. As this company grows, so does the technology. And as you well know, we do much of our work with computers. I'm beginning to think that we work for the computers. However, we have a staff of people that our customers can turn to for assistance. They call my office if they want to place an order for new service, if they want to talk about the frustration of a bill that they don't seemingly understand, if they want to move a telephone. Anything that they might have on their mind concerning Illinois Bell is usually directed to my office. And my office staff are trained to take care of all of the questions that a customer might have. We're responsible for issuing the orders for new customers, removing telephone service; we're also charged with the responsibility of collecting the monies due the company.

Q: You mentioned that Edwardsville was a manual office--that means an office that places local calls without a dial system--when you came here, which seems to imply that, as I know, that you were here when they converted to the dial system. What happened during that thing?

A: Well, I guess I'm one of the few managers left around in the state of Illinois that can say, "Yes, I lived through a dial conversion." We purchased property, we constructed a new exchange building. It was equipped with the latest telephone equipment called Number 5 Crossbar Switching. We were going to go from a manual telephone system to a totally unique new system that provided, at that time, direct distance dialing, which was totally new. Just think, you could dial the digit 1 and an area code and dial anywhere in the nation. And I can recall people having trouble placing a call to Highland through a manual telephone operator. All the equipment was installed and I can remember very vividly at midnight when we were going to make the cut from manual to dial service we were going to interrupt the entire telephone network in this community for about thirty seconds. And although it was very exciting, I couldn't help but feel a little sad because you see, there was a whole room full of telephone operators that have served on that switchboard for twenty, twenty-five, thirty, as much as thirty-five years. And all I could see with them were tears and anguish because there was another era that was coming to a close. And we went in a matter of thirty seconds from the most antiquated telephone system in southern Illinois to the most modern telephone plant in southern Illinois. And it was an interesting experience. You know, you can easily say, "I wouldn't trade that experience for a million dollars, but then again, I don't want to do it again."

Q: Well, what became of these operators?

A: Well, we . . . when we talk about going from manual to dial service, you know, you really don't eliminate telephone operators. Because, you see, you still have information, which now we call directory assistance, by the way. My age is showing. We still have credit card calls, we still have collect calls, and we still have operator assistance. You know, we have many people that are handicapped that really can't make telephone calls. All they can do is contact an operator and she has to do the work for them. So, no matter how sophisticated we might choose to get, we're still going to have the telephone operator for the unusual.

Q: It was in what year that this took place?

A: That was ten years ago.

Q: In 1963?

A: Yes, sir.

Q: In 1963. Okay, don't you also handle some other communities around besides just Edwardsville?

A: We have two communities nearby, the village of Marine and the village of Glencarbon, and we have installed what we call community dial offices. I guess you could honestly say they're big computers and they're trunked into our main office here in Edwardsville. They're unattended. Jerry, I guess, you know, you've walked into a major corporation and you've seen a switchboard in the lobby and a receptionist. Well, in reality we have the same type of equipment in our smaller communities such as Marine and Glencarbon. They're automatic dial switchboards, so to speak. And the switchboard operators are our telephone operators. They handle all the emergency calls and yet this equipment will automatically switch their calls just as though they were living in a metropolitan area.

Q: Right into a regular office.

A: Oh, yes.

Q: . . . Collinsville, here.

A: Yes. Right now we closed . . . for a number of years we maintained an operator office here in Edwardsville and then economy provided that it wasn't feasible, so we consolidated all of our operator services out of Collinsville. And anybody in our particular area dialing for an operator will be answered by a Collinsville operator. Anybody in this whole area including the other five telephone companies operating in Madison County. Information is served in the Collinsville area, too.

Q: Well, in these smaller communities, were you in essence the manager also? What is your role and function there as a community representative? Do you get involved in things there, too?

A: We're involved in our--quote, unquote--"community dial offices" just as readily as we are in our major exchanges. We attend on a frequent basis their village board meetings, we share with their frustrations of problems in funding for securing a police car where there might be just one police car in the community, we lend out expertise if we have it available for any particular situation. Here again, although we're represented by an unattended computer, so to speak, we still try to convince the people in that community that we're a real and live part of that community and we're there to help and assist when we can.

Q: You say lend expertise. What do you mean exactly by that?

A: Well, Jerry, there's a lot of communities that, for instance, own their own water companies and in fact, they are then in the utility business. And we all, you know, we all operate a utility, so to speak, so we advise

them of some of our rules and regulations and some of the procedures that we use that are tried and true and proven successful. We have a host of engineers working for Illinois Bell, if there is a problem that arises that we have some knowledgeable people that can help solve the problem, why, we call on them to assist. When a little village has a new civic park and they want to put up lights, I'm sure that there's enough volunteers from Illinois Bell and enough equipment to set poles and things of this nature.

Q: Well, what you're telling me then is that the role of the phone company is such . . . is viewed many times as a vast monopoly oftentimes could be a little bit different than that first blush might meet the eye. They are very deeply involved in community things. Why is this?

A: Jerry, this is the whole philosophy of Illinois Bell. I'm sure that if you walked into any community in Illinois and you surveyed the scoutmasters, the girl scout leaders, members of official boards of churches or deacons, part-time aldermen, little league coaches, anything that you would classify really as Americana, you're going to find a vast majority of telephone people serving in those particular capacities.

Q: Well, is this because the telephone people are unusual, or is it because they're encouraged by the company, or why is this?

A: No, I don't think that we're anymore unusual than anybody else, but yes, Illinois Bell fosters the philosophy that you have to be a good citizen. You know, there is a quotation that you only pass this way once and surely you must contribute something.

Q: It's a good quotation. I guess the question that I have is how . . . I suppose what I'm really digging for is to find out just how did this happen to begin in Illinois Bell? What precedent, is this a written out code of conduct that the community is to be built at the same time as the services to be rendered, or is this something that just grew out of tradition, or where did it come from?

A: Well, I guess I'd have to say it goes back to a simple word of tradition. The telephone industry was really built by, in my opinion, two-fisted, hard-working, drinking men. They worked hard and they played hard and they felt very strongly about a spirit of service. You know, the postal department claims about the mail must go through whether hail, sleet, or snow, but telephone men through history have been truly living examples of coming to the fore in all sorts of crisis. And I guess we've overlooked that point, crisis. Many people in a lifetime might go through one or two or three crisis, so to speak, but it's everyday business with us. We have a long, long history of telephone people that have even given their lives to try and maintain communication, trying to serve. Even in this modern day, very recently in Chicago when that air crash occurred on the south side of Chicago, within moments telephone people were there setting up emergency communications. The horrible train wreck, within moments telephone people were swarming into the hospitals, swarming onto the scene of the accident setting up emergency communications. You know, you asked a question, I think that that's I guess, part of being a telephone man. You know this community a few years ago was without water. One hates to say that your community gained national recognition for that sort of thing, but we did.

We only had one water main. We were totally without water for three days. And it was telephone people that set up emergency communications, we set up loud speaker trucks, we patrolled the community announcing where emergency water could be received. We have a history of telephone operators that have died at their switchboards in hotel fires notifying residents that they were in danger. Where there is massive floods, hurricanes, people volunteer to go in and restore communications so that we can restore some sort of normal life to those that have been afflicted. And I guess that's all part of being a telephone man.

Q: It's a thing that maybe you gather by osmosis rather than them really being told about it, it's something that happens to you over a period of time where you know about it, it becomes a part of a tradition than a built in reflex.

A: Well, Jerry, I guess yes it is. Because I'm like an old fire horse. The minute I hear the sirens scream down Main Street, I want to know where and what's happening. And basically because there might be a cutoff of communications. You know, they say why should a telephone manager be concerned about a fire. Well, that fire can eat out a major cable and throw a whole city or a portion of a city out of communications. And I feel it is my responsibility to see that something is done to restore some sort of communications so that there is ample fire protection, police protection, there's ample opportunity to secure medical aid to a stricken community. And that's really our job.

Q: Would you say then, that this feeling of service kind of thing that functions in crisis as well as it does, could there be an overriding kind of constant feeling of need to solve problems? I've noticed that this is the day and age of problem identification, people seem to be able to identify problems very readily but very few are coming up with solutions. Is this part of it too?

A: Well, as I said earlier, we try to contribute our expertise to any particular civic or community problem, but by and large our first line of duty is communication. No matter what might strike our particular town, be it a man-made tragedy or Mother Nature taking over, our first responsibility is to secure the safety of our fellow citizens through immediate communication. We want to make sure that if tragedy or local, state, or national tragedy strikes that we have the responsibility of seeing that everybody's informed, that everybody has a way of securing aid.

Q: Do you remember some of these things that have happened over the years, tragedies or other kinds of things that happened that . . . . You mentioned some.

A: Well, I know that we have had a few devastating tornadoes in the area. I have, I can remember well the day that I was sitting in a home one evening playing a friendly game of cards in Rockford, Illinois, when the Rock River went on a rampage and the flood waters started to seep into the community. And really I got a call from one of my fellow workers advising me of the problem that was happening in one section of the city and it was just a natural thing for me to do to go and secure my mobile unit and rush to the scene to make sure that if our services were knocked out, at least I had mobile telephone contact and we could secure all the help we needed in

that particular area. We set up--we can convert schools into major communication centers if need be with instant communication. We've got equipment available at central locations throughout the state. We have telephone trailers that we can call on for an instant communication if we're afflicted by fire, flood, or tornado.

Q: I think we've struck something real interesting here because the idea of maintaining communications, it seems however that this whole philosophy seems to permeate telephone people, and it seems in a sense hard to put, but to sluff over in other activities. When there are no crisis as it were, but there are day to day, and unlike kinds of problems in communities, it seems the telephone people, from what you tell me, are ready to move ahead with this philosophy and just begin to try to solve these problems.

A: Well, nobody likes to think of emergencies or tragedies, but we're all trained for it. It's a way of life with us. As I said earlier, you know, you might live a lifetime and have only one or two or three crisis in your lifetime, but it's everyday business with us. You know, if you do have a crisis invariably somebody in the telephone industry is going to share it one way or another with you. And it's a way of life with us and maybe we're super sensitive and we're fired up with ambition, I don't know what. I know that we keep going. We just don't seem to be the kind of people that can sit around and wait for things to happen, we've got to keep busy even to the point where we have an association of retired, and people with twenty-one years or more of service with Illinois Bell that are eligible to belong to what we call the Telephone Pioneers. And low and behold, after most people are put out to pasture, the Telephone Pioneers are in doing all sorts of civic projects such as collecting eye glasses for the needy, providing reading material for prisons, building or buying equipment for mentally retarded schools, building electronic balls so that blind children can play, we just don't quit.

Q: This is a face of the phone company I think that not too many people see day in and day out. I know that we publicize some of these things, but I think there is a much deeper involvement here and a richer involvement than might first meet the eye, throughout all of the companies that Illinois Bell has throughout the state.

A: Jerry, we're filled with unsung heroes. The Library of Congress provides the blind with talking machines. They can secure books that have been recorded and they can listen rather than read, but what nobody in this world seems to know is that there are countless telephone men and women that volunteer their time to repair all of these machines, to see that they're kept working. This is just one of the many, many things that telephone people do. Even though they are retired, they volunteer their services as gray ladies to work in old people's homes and hospitals to alleviate shortages of nurses. I guess you could open up a whole new chapter of what telephone people do and the way of contributing to civic and community life.

Q: So, what you're saying, I guess, then in essence is that there is an organization dedicated to communications at the same time there seems to be an informal organizational structure which is just as dedicated to other kinds of things and it seems mostly civic worthwhile charity affairs and so on.

A: Yes, and we take pride in our work. From the president of the telephone company down to a mail carrier, we take pride in our civic and social accomplishments. We as a company and we as individuals participate in statewide, citywide, or communitywide fundraising projects. We're very concerned with the future of the private educational institutions in our state. We participate in all United Funds, we fully support . . . . I remember, what was it, not more than two years ago that the president of our company took on the chair job of fighting for clean water for the state of Illinois. And many people were a little dubious about whether or not we should get involved, but yet we felt that as responsible citizens of this state, we had to do something to help clean up the water supply in Illinois and to get adequate funds to do so. And we felt that if our president felt strongly enough about it, that we would all pitch in and help. And we were very successful in our efforts.

Q: Most people wonder, I guess, if there is any question, you know, why is it good business to do this kind of thing? What has this got to do with the business of making money, running a company and so on? Why are telephone people involved in this kind of stuff?

A: Well, Jerry, many people think that we're not in business to make money. I assure you this is true. I don't know, many people I guess think we're just another big government agency. We have to consider, really, I guess about three categories. We have to feel very strongly about the welfare and the future of our employees. We have to seriously consider the people that are going to invest their life savings in our business and we also have to consider the guy that's just using the service, so it's sort of a three legged stool. You've got the consumer, the investor, and the employee. And it's a pretty tough task, but we try to give them all the best of attention we know how.

End of Tape One