

# Use My Phone

A **The Work Office** Week Two Project

July 10 - July 16

Method: Experimental

Materials: Cell Phone, Rollover Minutes

Variables: Resource Scarcity/Saturation

Hypothesis: Rejected

This is the story of how I decided to give  
away free talk time on my phone...

And thought it was a grand gesture...

Maybe even the start of a new American  
tradition...

And everyone who heard about it thought it  
was a great idea...

And no one actually took me up on the offer  
(except for a guy who was about to do LSD)

**This is the story of Use My Phone**

The idea started like this:

I've been with AT&T for the past two years, paying for 450 minutes a month, and usually using less than a third of them.

I didn't want 450 minutes a month, but I had an iPhone at the time (it's since been stolen), and that was the least amount of minutes I could buy and still use the phone.

So I bought them. And didn't use them. And every month, I added more minutes to a vault of "Rollover" minutes, that I was promised I could one day use (unless they expired before I had the chance).

By the middle of July, my rollover balance looked like this:

**Anytime Minutes**

Used 64 of 450

**Night/Weekend Minutes**

Used 53 of 5,000

**Mobile to Mobile Minutes**

UNLIMITED  
Used 31 of Unlimited

**Rollover Minutes**

Used 0 of 3,185

**Rollover Summary**

You have 3,185;  
You used 0; 319 minutes to  
expire on 08/05/2009

**Next Bill Cycle**

08/06/2009

[Check Upgrade  
Options](#)

Personalize:

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[Send a Text  
Message](#)

[Phone/Device  
Support](#)



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[Usage Support](#)

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Minutes

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Three thousand one hundred eighty-five minutes. I wouldn't know where to start using them.

So, I decided to give them away. I thought they might be of use to:

- People whose minutes don't rollover
- People who run out of minutes
- People who use pre-paid phones
- People who wouldn't use their own minutes on non-essential calls
- People who don't have a phone
- People who would otherwise be using a pay phone (does anyone still use a pay phone?)
- Anyone who would enjoy the luxury of a free call

My intention was that people would make appointments, and have up to half an hour to make one or more phone calls.

I imagined that they would schedule their call with the other party in advance, and then come meet me at a coffee shop, a public space, or The Work Office, and have a delightful phone call while I read a book and tried not to listen in.

After they used the phone, they would fill out a form, which looked like this:

## Use My Phone

Time & Place: \_\_\_\_\_

Phone User: \_\_\_\_\_

Photo:

Call Destination: \_\_\_\_\_

Call Purpose: \_\_\_\_\_

Comments (Use Reverse If Needed):

I sent people an alert about the project - which also served as an invitation - via e-mail.

This was the e-mail I sent:

**From:** Drayton Hiers <drayton@draytonhiers.com>  
**Subject:** Use My Phone // Free Calls on Me  
**Date:** July 10, 2009 11:35:26 AM EDT  
**To:** Drayton Hiers

Dear Friend,

Are you running low on talk time? Routinely going over your monthly minutes? Putting off important calls until nights and weekends kick in? Let me be of service.

In conjunction with The Work Office, a modern day WPA initiative, I'm offering you a phone call on me. Next week, I will be stationing myself in Brooklyn and Manhattan, equipped with a cell phone, a call log and over 1,000 rollover minutes. You're invited to call whomever, wherever, whenever, for up to 30 minutes (some restrictions apply\*), completely for free.

Appointments are currently being offered July 13 - 15 (Mon. - Wed.) between the hours of 1:00 pm and 7:00 pm. I will be in Brooklyn on Monday, Brooklyn and Lower Manhattan on Tuesday, and Times Square on Wednesday. To set up a call time, or for more information, please e-mail Drayton Hiers at [usemyphone@gmail.com](mailto:usemyphone@gmail.com)

\* All dialed numbers must be within the United States. All dialed numbers must be toll free. You may use a calling card to call abroad, as long as the access number is a national number.

\*\*\*\*\*

A little more info:

**The Work Office** (TWO) is a multidisciplinary art project disguised as an employment agency. Informed by the Works Progress Administration (WPA) of the Great Depression in the 1930s, TWO is a gesture to "make work" for visual and performing artists, writers, and others by giving them simple, idea-based assignments to explore, document, or improve life in New York.

**Use My Phone** is a service oriented project which seeks to offer New Yorkers a simple gift: free talk time. In making use of a resource that would otherwise go to waste - unused cell phone minutes - Use My Phone is a way to create a new form of interaction in this city, as well as to blur the boundaries between public and private possessions.



And in response, I got e-mails from excited friends:

**From:** Rafael Gallegos  
**Subject: Re: Use My Phone // Free Calls on Me**  
**Date:** July 10, 2009 11:37:14 AM EDT  
**To:** Drayton Hiers <drayton@draytonhiers.com>

yo! i wanna tweet this! you have a link or anything?  
this looks great!!!  
r

**From:** beka economopoulos  
**Subject: Re: Use My Phone // Free Calls on Me**  
**Date:** July 11, 2009 11:53:24 AM EDT  
**To:** Drayton Hiers <drayton@draytonhiers.com>

dray, this is awesome!!!! love usemyphone and the WPA/TWO. both great!!

love,  
b&j

**From:** noel hidalgo  
**Subject: Re: Use My Phone // Free Calls on Me**  
**Date:** July 12, 2009 1:23:06 PM EDT  
**To:** Drayton Hiers <drayton@draytonhiers.com>

what's the work office?

These excited friends passed the e-mail on to other excited friends.

They forwarded the e-mail to e-mail lists read by artists and culture makers.

I put an ad on Craigslist, which is the #1 site in the world for people who are looking for free things (and sex).

I expected to get at least twenty inquiries.

But the response to the "usemyphone" e-mail account was a little underwhelming:

**New! Colors and themes**  
Check out the [Themes tab](#) in Settings to personalize the look and feel of your inbox or return to the classic look. [Hi!](#)

Search Mail Search the Web [Show search options](#)  
[Create a filter](#)

**Compose Mail**

- [Inbox](#)
- [Starred](#)
- [Sent Mail](#)
- [Drafts](#)

- [Personal](#)
- [Travel](#)
- [6 more](#) ▾
- [Contacts](#)
- [Tasks](#) <sup>New!</sup>

**Chat**

Search, add, or invite

Drayton @ Use My



**Talk face to face**  
[Try video chat](#)

Drayton Hiers

[Options](#) [Add Contact](#)

Invite a friend

Give Gmail to:

Send Invite 50 left

[Preview Invite](#)

1 - 1 of 1

Archive Report spam Delete Move to Labels More actions [Refresh](#)

Select: All, None, Read, Unread, Starred, Unstarred

[craigslist.org](#) POST/EDIT/DELETE : (general community) Use My Phone // Free Calls on Me Jul 1

Select: All, None, Read, Unread, Starred, Unstarred

Archive Report spam Delete Move to Labels More actions [Refresh](#)

1 - 1 of 1

Visit [settings](#) to save time with **keyboard shortcuts!**

You are currently using 0 MB (0%) of your 7348 MB.

Last account activity: 2 hours ago at this IP (69.123.88.138). [Details](#)

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That's right.

No one e-mailed me.

No excitement.

I decided to try an alternate form of communication.

I posted flyers throughout highly trafficked parts of Brooklyn. I posted them at coffee shops, on telephone booths (in case anyone still uses a telephone booth), on the sides of post boxes, at street fairs, near public housing projects, in front of Thai restaurants on gentrifying streets - all kinds of places, aimed at all kinds of people, with the thought that some of them would be able to use my phone.

This was the flyer I posted:

# Use My Phone // Free Calls on Me

Are you **running low on talk time**? Routinely going over your monthly minutes? Putting off important calls until nights and weekends kick in? Let me be of service.

In conjunction with The Work Office, a modern day WPA initiative, I'm offering you a phone call on me. Next week, I will be stationing myself in Brooklyn and Manhattan, equipped with a cell phone, a call log and over 1,000 rollover minutes.

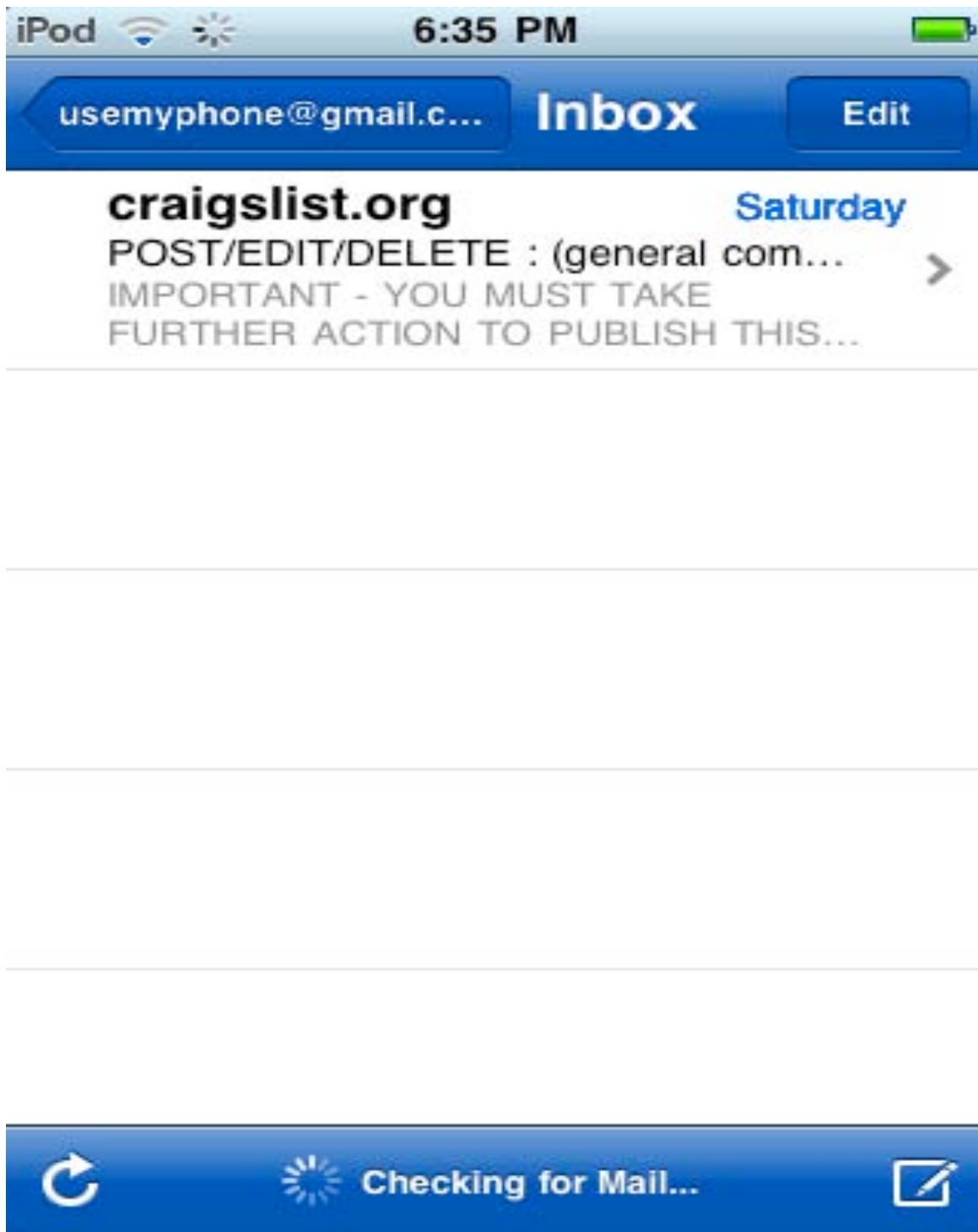
**You're invited to call whomever, wherever, whenever, for up to 30 minutes (some restrictions apply\*), completely for free.**

Appointments are currently being offered July 13 - 15 (Mon. - Wed.) between the hours of 1:00 pm and 7:00 pm. I will be in Brooklyn on Monday, Brooklyn and Lower Manhattan on Tuesday, and Times Square on Wednesday. To set up a call time, or for more information, please e-mail [usemyphone@gmail.com](mailto:usemyphone@gmail.com)

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[usemyphone@gmail.com](mailto:usemyphone@gmail.com)

But a day later, the "usemyphone" e-mail account still looked like this:



I had miscalculated the appeal of my free phone. People were still stopping me at parties and sending me e-mails to tell me how much they loved the project. But even they weren't interested in actually using the phone.

A typical exchange went like this:

“That’s so cool that you’re giving people your phone.”

“Thanks! Why don’t you schedule a time to make a call?”

“Oh you know, I already have so many minutes I don’t use. But good luck!”

With all this non-reaction, I had only one option left:

To take my phone directly to the people!



(This is me in Union Square)



I wound up in Union Square because I couldn't offer my phone to anyone in Brooklyn. It seemed I couldn't offer it to anyone who actually lived in New York, no matter how much they thought it was nice that I asked.

But if I couldn't give my phone to New Yorkers, maybe I could give it to people who were in New York but not New Yorkers.

Tourists. Transients. Faux Ex-Pats. People who spend their life as a sort of long-term visitor, passing through a city where they never put down roots.

Surely if I went directly to these people, they would make use of my phone.

Which was how I ended up sitting on the steps of Union Square, with my call log serving as an advertisement.

## From the Notebook of Drayton Hiers

Tuesday, January 14  
Union Square

4:00 pm

“Who can I call?”

“Anyone.”

“Give me the phone.”

“Anywhere in the U.S.”

“Oh, never mind. I wanted to call Africa.”

4:10 pm

A guy taking photos of the general U Square scene sees my sign and smiles.

“That’s great!”

“You want a call?”

“No thanks.”

4:25 pm

A French guy whose bike is literally falling apart – the pedal drops off, the rear brake line is severed and dangles to the side – rides up and says he’ll use the phone. He says he’s lived in Brooklyn since March - “In Willy”, he says, meaning Williamsburg (which, for reasons no one understands, has

suddenly become the center for French expats in New York) – and says that he’s also an artist; “I make raw food and music”.

He’s wearing a pair of Converse high tops with a girl’s phone number written on one of them. “I met her at a party”, he says, “and I was new, so I didn’t have anything to write her number on, so she put it on my shoe.”

(No, this doesn’t make sense, but he had lived in New York since March and still didn’t have a phone, so...)

“And you met her again?”

“Yes, but we didn’t make out.” I think he means they didn’t work out. His English is very French.

He uses the phone to call a friend who he is supposed to be meeting. He tries the call twice, and both times has to leave a message:

“I’m in Union Square with my bike. I’ll keep looking for you.”

I have him fill out the call log form, and for purpose of phone call he writes: “contact her to go on LSD trip.”

4:33 pm

A young man and woman wander past me, looking for a third friend in the crowd.

He (seeing my sign): You want to call him?

She (shaking her head, embarrassed): No.

Me (yelling as they pass by): It’s free!

4:36 pm

A guy sitting next to me is convinced that I have to be selling something. That the free phone sign is a scam of some sort.

I explain the process to him. That it's an art project, that I take his photo, have him fill out the form, and then he can call anyone in the U.S. for a half hour.

“That's it?”

“That's it.”

“That's cool. I don't need it or anything, but that's cool.”

After spending 45 minutes in Union Square and only having one person use my phone, I decide that I might have better luck in Times Square.

Union Square is still too local; everyone already has a phone.

I figure that Times Square will be a sea of tourists, particularly with the new seating area.

Surely, this is where I will find a high demand for my phone.

## From the Notebook of Drayton Hiers

Tuesday, January 14  
Times Square

5:15 pm

I sit at one of the new red tables on Broadway between 46<sup>th</sup> and 47<sup>th</sup>. I find one with two chairs, and I sit there, pulling out my call log, my phone, my notebook, two pens, and my iPod so that I can check e-mail, even though I can never get good Wi-Fi in Times Square, despite the plethora of open networks.



5:22 pm

People are more interested in my free chair than my free phone. I keep having to tell them “No, it’s taken” or “It’s for whoever uses the phone.” No one asks to use the phone.

5:27 pm

An older, dreadlocked man in a T-shirt with the letters NY, and then a heart with an X across it, and then the letter U (“New York Doesn’t Love You”), walks by, saying as he passes:

“Nothing’s free anymore.”

His tone isn’t cynical so much as regretful. I assure him the call is indeed free, but he only shakes his head, at a loss, and repeats again, before disappearing into the crowd:

“Nothing’s free anymore.”

5:35 pm

After 20 minutes, the selfless act of giving up my phone becomes the selfish act of not giving up my chair, which I’m asked for every three or four minutes. I become a jackass for not letting people here have the only thing they need.

And just as I write that, a man comes up and asks,

“Is this seat - ”

And before he can even finish, I say, “It’s yours.”

And then I pack up my gear and leave Times Square behind.

## From the Notebook of Drayton Hiers

Tuesday, January 14  
TKTS Booth & Duffy Square

6:30 – 7:30 pm



I guess that this is technically still Times Square, but instead of sitting amongst the tables at street level, I'm now on New York's version of the Spanish Steps. I had to take a break to eat a sandwich, drink a coffee, and get over the sting of defeat.

If I had known that I was going to take this project to the public, I would have made some banners or something.



The rule that I've set for myself is that I will *offer* my minutes, but I won't *hawk* them. I suppose I could walk around yelling out "Free Phone Minutes! Call a friend! Call your hotel! Make dinner reservations!" but that would violate the spirit – or perhaps the dignity – of the project.

So instead I sit patiently in the crowd, sign on display. But even here, even with everyone being from Europe or South America or wherever else, all of these people have cell phones.

One guy sees my sign and his eyes bulge out to three times their usual size. He just. Can't. Believe it. I make a gesture with my hands, indicating the sign and the phone, "Come, use, enjoy." I feel like I'm inviting a stray animal in out of the rain. He shakes his head and turns away.

Two Irish girls, writing postcards. They're street musicians, buskers, the kind of people I hung out with in Oslo when I befriended the escape artist. Surely these girls have a pre-paid phone; surely they'll want to use mine instead. I consider offering it to them directly, "Pardon me, do you have any phone call needs that I can help you out with," – will this break my "no hawking" rule? I want them to discover the sign for themselves, the synchronicity, a little magic in a summer city. Instead, when they finally see the sign, they give me a sort of sideways look – who is this guy and why is he offering his phone? – and then they gather their things and head down the steps.

Really, I need a sign that says:

**Use My Phone**  
**It's an Art Project**  
**It's Not a Scam**  
**I'm Not Crazy**

Eventually, it occurs to me:

Naked Cowboys, living statues, Afro-funk bands, pretzel vendors, flyer hander outers, TV news studios, shining corporate logos; in Times Square, everyone is selling something. I'm just one more person in the mix. Free phone offerer.

All these billboards, everywhere you look, and perhaps my sign is just one more advertisement.



Maybe if I had blinking lights.

And of course, this whole time I'm sitting in the middle of the crowd, part of them, but also standing out, separate, trying to offer something they have no use for. Really, I just feel out of touch. By offering people connectivity, I've made myself more alone.

From the Notebook of Drayton Hiers

Tuesday, January 14  
Washington Square



7:49 pm

Eventually, I decide that if it takes a crazy person to use my phone - and apparently it does - then I should go to where the crazy people are.

I arrive in the park and flourish my props. It becomes a magic act: pull the call log out of my bag, hold it high, display to crowd, set it down on the marble pedestal. Repeat with the phone. People notice - how could they not?

Immediately, a middle aged man walks over. He appears to be homeless, a park denizen, probably a little crazy, and he has no question as to why I would offer the phone. He just wants to use it.

I explain about the call form. No problem. I explain that I will dial the number for him. No problem. I explain that I will take his photo.

Problem.

No photos.

Well, I have to take the photo, it's part of the project.

You can't take a photo of me.

I need a photo if you're going to use the phone. I need documentation.

Why you gotta take a photo?

I feel the opportunity to get him to use my phone fading fast. This is only my second customer of the day, I said I was offering the phone, I said it was free, I came here in search of just this very person to use it, and I am going to do all I can to let him use it.

I can take a photo of your shoes.

He laughs at that, and says no. Then he pulls out a cigarette and begins to smoke. He sits there, smoking, next to me. I can't really offer my phone to someone else while he's there, so I wait him out. The phone is still on the bench, between the two of us.

He grabs it.

Give me that phone.

He begins to push number buttons. I have to admit that I'm not entirely certain, if I let him dial the numbers, they would actually connect to a phone, or at least would connect to a phone that he belong to someone he knew.

Sir! I say, with as much authority as I can muster in this situation, and he hands the phone back. I move the phone to the other side of me, away from him, and we sit there, a mutual détente, he finishing his cigarette, me scanning the park, trying to get a sense if there's anyone here, anyone at all, who would actually use my phone.

And, of course, there's not. I've learned the routine by now: people notice, people smile, or they laugh, or they're confused, but they don't partake.

And after half an hour or so, I put my phone away.

These are the places where no one used my phone:

- The Brooklyn Museum
- The Tea Lounge Park Slope
- The New Times Square
- The TKTS Stairs
- Duffy Square
- Washington Square

These are the places where someone used my phone:

- Union Square

This is the form of the one person who used my phone:

## Use My Phone

Time & Place: 16:25 PM UNION SQ, MANHATTAN, NY, USA  
CARTHE.UNIVERSE

Phone User: MARTIN RICHARDS

Photo:



Call Destination: FRIEND CALLED BRYN

Call Purpose: CONTACTHER TO GO ON LSO TRIP

Comments (Use Reverse If Needed):

I HAD TO ~~CALL~~ A MESSAGE.

# I wrote this while sitting in Times Square:

It occurs to me that if I could go back in time, this would be an amazing project.

If I was doing this in 1996, it would be genius.



My original idea was simple.

I wanted to explore the nature of intangible property, and discover if a private resource that some people had in abundance - unused cell phone minutes - could be freely given to (and used by) those who lacked the resource.

My hypothesis was that the ability to talk to someone, to connect, if given freely, would be gratefully received.

What I discovered, though, was that no one - at least no one in New York - lacks for this resource (or at least, not enough to use a stranger's phone).

In a city that is full of constant deprivation, the one thing that we have in spades is the means to communicate with others.

And it seems, based on the number of people who told me they're already drowning in call time, we don't make enough use of it.

Perhaps, as the old trope goes, we're too busy living our lives in New York to actually connect with anyone.

Or perhaps we're simply part of a system that gives us more of something - anytime minutes, weekend minutes, night minutes, in-network minutes, top five friends minutes, family member minutes - than we can possibly use.

Perhaps we're all over invested in a resource that we can't possibly consume.

Perhaps it's one of the few resources we still have to give away freely, and thus we already have too much of it.