

# A Mountain of Dog Food

By Jack English

In the end, artificial intelligence will kill us all. The proof is in the 500 bags of dog food in my garage.

I came home from work on a lovely, warm, summer's evening and started to pull into my driveway when I found it blocked by a mountain of cardboard boxes, boxes of dog food. And not just any dog food. It was Golden Royal Dog Food which goes for \$75 a bag.

Dog food or no, the first order of business on getting home from work was letting my dog, Grady, out for... well you know. He sniffed all around the boxes, and wagged his tail a mile a minute. He must have thought it was all for him. It wasn't.

Each box contained two fifteen-pound bags of Golden Royal Dog Food. I did a quick count and found there were two-hundred and fifty boxes.

As I looked for shipping papers to tell me who sent the dog food, or shipped it, or anybody I could speak too, I heard a distant peal of thunder. The westward sky was turning dark.

I opened my garage and started moving the boxes inside on the theory that soggy, rain-soaked boxes would be harder to return than boxes in pristine condition. Grady kept getting under my feet so I put him back in the house.

By the time I had moved the fiftieth box, my muscles were beginning to ache. I wanted to take a break, then I heard another peal of thunder, this one was close and loud enough to rattle the windows. The westward looking sky was a rolling mass of charcoal-colored clouds. I moved another box.

When the first sprinkles of rain started, I still had a dozen boxes to move. My muscles burned. The paperwork was on the last box and it was pouring by the time I got the box inside. I was soaked; the box was soaked; and the paperwork telling me who sent the dog food was soaked. One thing I could read was the invoice total, \$27,500. The words I used next are not fit to print.

As I sat at the kitchen table, ready to call the Golden Royal Dog Food Company, Grady came up to me, whimpering and whining and wagging his tail. I had to feed him. That done, I tried to contact the company to find out how the problem occurred.

After four rings, someone answered the phone, “Golden Royal Dog Food...”  
“Yes,” I said. “I would like...”

Then I was interrupted by a voice that said, “... where your dog is our number one priority. Golden Royal Dog Food is made with only the finest ingredients, cooked by master chefs, and contains all the vitamins and minerals needed for a healthy coat. How may I direct your call?”

“Yes, I would like to speak to someone...”

Then I was interrupted by that voice again. “You may speak to a live operator. The wait time is currently one hour and forty minutes, or you may speak to our Artificial Intelligence Assistant, Eddie.”

“I’ll try Eddie...” I started to say when the voice interrupted me.

“Hi, I am Eddie. I will help you navigate our system. Briefly state the purpose of your call.”

“You delivered two-hundred and fifty boxes of dog food that I did not order.”

“Ordering dog food,” the voice said. “Would you like the Squire formulation. It is 95% vegetables, whole grains, and plant matter and 5% beef and poultry byproducts at \$45 per fifteen-pound bag...”

“No,” I tried to interrupt the voice. “I do not want to order anything.”

But Eddie continued anyway. “...or the Prince formulation which is 80% vegetables, whole grains and plant matter and 20% beef and poultry byproducts at \$50 per fifteen-pound bag...”

“Stop! Halt! Discontinue! Arrêt!” Sometimes I lapse into French when I get frustrated.

“...or the Queen formulation which is Vegan at \$60 per twelve-and-a-half-pound bag, or the King formulation which is 70% vegetables, whole grains, and plant matter and 30% beef and chicken byproducts at \$75 per bag? And before you say anything, ask yourself how much you love your dog.”

“No! No! Eddie,” I said. “This is a delivery problem.”

“You can use ten-day shipping for \$6 per box or you may use next day air freight for \$19 per box. Delivery is free if you order ten boxes of dog food. Please select your shipping option.”

“Eddie!” I held my breath in exasperation.

“Yes? What is it?”

“You have made an incorrect delivery.”

“Please confirm your address.”

I told Eddie my address.

“Our records show a delivery was made there today. Thank you for purchasing Golden Royal Dog Food. Goodbye.” Eddie hung up on me.

I looked at Grady. He stood by the garage door and whined. He could smell all that lovely food just waiting for him in the garage.

So, I called back and opted to wait for a human operator. When I did, I got a message that said, “Call center hours are 8:00 a.m. to 8:00 p.m.....”

I looked at my watch. It said 6:00 p.m. So, even if I was on hold for an hour and forty minutes, I was sure to get someone. However, the message continued “...Greenwich Mean Time. Try our Artificial Intelligence Assistant, Eddie or call back tomorrow.”

Greenwich Mean Time is the time at the Royal Observatory in Greenwich, London. London is five hours ahead of us so, the Golden Royal Dog Food call center was closed and had been closed for several hours.

I wanted to get the mountain of dog food out of my garage, so I set the alarm for 3:00 a.m. and called again. Apparently, everyone with a problem decided to call as soon as the call center opened and my wait time was two hours, sixteen minutes.

When I finally got an operator on the line I said, “I have a bit of a problem. Your company delivered two-hundred and fifty boxes of dog food to my house that I did not order.”

“May I have your name, please?” the operator asked.

I told them my name.

“May I have your address?”

I told them.

“Does your credit card end in the following four digits?” They read off the last four digits of my credit card.

“Yes,” I said.

“We have a confirmed order for two-hundred and fifty boxes of Golden Royal Dog Food, King formulation, delivered to the address you gave us and charged to the credit card number you confirmed. The order was placed Tuesday a week ago at 2:18 p.m.”

“But I didn’t place the order.”

“Someone at your house did. The order came from your IP address.”

“Impossible! I was at work at the time you claim the order was placed and I live alone. It is just me and my dog, Grady.”

“Well, now you will have plenty of food for him.”

“I did not order the dog food. I want to return it.”

There was an exasperated sign on the other end of the line. “Very well. If you have changed your mind, there is a 15% restocking fee and you must pay for return freight. Let’s see, the restocking charge will be \$4,125 and return freight will be \$1,800.”

“But I did not order this dog food! I will not pay your ridiculous charges!”

“Sir, you must pay them unless you can prove you did not place the order. And if you did not place it, who could have?”

“A hacker.”

“Then you better find a good computer expert, otherwise you must either pay your outstanding bill of \$27,500 or pay \$5,925 to return the product. Goodbye.”

So, then I called Pat Shore, a computer expert used by Jack English, an Atlantic City lawyer I know. Pat is a Drexel grad and had six years with the Army’s Cyber Command. She now runs her own computer security business.

Pat came to my house. Grady jumped all over her.

“Down boy! Down!” He saw her as just another playmate.

I explained the problem and showed her the mountain of dog food in my garage. She was sympathetic, but opened her laptop and got right to work. It only took her an hour to figure out what happened.

“Well?” I asked. I held Grady’s collar with one hand and petted him with the other.

“You know,” she said, “that computers can be used as televisions and televisions are basically computers, right?”

I said, “right.”

“And both televisions and computers are full of AI, artificial intelligence.”

“OK,” I said.

“You know how Word or Excel keeps track of the most recent files you have worked on?”

“Yes.”

“And you know that when you search the Internet, your browser keeps a list of all the websites you have visited?”

“Sort of,” I said.

Then Pat said, “The artificial intelligence in your computer, and in your television, keeps track of what you asked it to do.”

“So?”

Grady whined and pulled to free himself from my grip. I let him go and he sat on the other side of the den looking at us.

“Let’s see what the artificial intelligence in your television has been doing.” Pat Shore entered a command on the TV remote.

The TV said, “Hi! I am Roy, your Artificial Intelligence Assistant. How may I help you?”

“Roy,” Pat said, “Play back a log of everything you saw, heard and did starting at 2:18 p.m. Tuesday a week ago.”

The television clicked on. There was a box in the lower left-hand corner of the screen that showed who the artificial intelligence was interacting with. It was my dog, Grady. He was looking out the window at something and started barking.

“I didn’t get that,” Roy said. “Can you repeat that word?”

Grady turned toward the television and barked.

“I do not understand. I am looking in my foreign language database. Please stand by.”

A large three-quarter circle spiraled around on the screen. “Nothing found in the foreign language database. “Searching sound database. Please stand by.” The three-quarter circle continued to spiral.

Then Roy said. “The sound was identified as a dog bark. If you are a dog, bark or say “Yes.” Roy displayed an image of a Black Labrador Retriever on the screen. Grady is a Black Labrador Retriever. The inset picture of him barked.

Roy said, “Dogs cannot read so you are probably not researching anything. Would you like to see a dog video? If so, bark or say “Yes.” Roy paused for a second, then said, “Would you like to make a purchase? If so, bark or say “Yes.”

The inset picture of Grady barked.

“Tell me what kind of purchase you would like to make.” Roy displayed dog houses from half a dozen websites. “If you would like to purchase a dog house, bark or say “Yes.””

In the recorded picture, Grady sat in the den, looking at the television, his head cocked like he didn’t know what the television was asking him to do.

Roy paused for a second, then said, “If you would like to purchase a dog toy, bark, or say “Yes.” Roy displayed dog toys from half a dozen websites.

Grady quietly stared at the television.

Roy paused for a second then said, “If you would like to purchase dog food, bark, or say “Yes.” Roy displayed dog food from half a dozen websites. One of them happened to be a can of Blue Dog food, the kind I feed Grady. He recognized it and he barked.

“Very well. I will search for dog food. If you would like results presented by best price, bark or say “Yes.” Roy paused, “If you would like results presented by maximum nutrition, bark or say “Yes.”

The recorded Grady barked.

I turned away from the television toward my faithful companion and asked in a low tone, “Grady, what did you do?”

Grady lay down, rested his head on his paws and whined. It was his go to move whenever he tore up the trash or chewed one of my sneakers.

Roy, my Artificial Intelligence Assistant continued speaking. “The highest rated dog food in terms of nutrition is Golden Royal, King formulation at \$75 per fifteen-pound bag. Is this what you want? If so, bark or say “Yes.” Roy then displayed a closeup of the Golden Royal King formulation dog food. The bag had the picture of a very fetching Golden Retriever on it.

The recorded Grady barked. The real-life Grady in the den with us, whimpered a little.

Then Roy said, “The website offers free delivery if you order ten boxes of dog food at a time. If you would like free delivery, bark, or say “Yes.”

Golden Royal’s website contained a short video clip of a Golden Retriever playing with a ball. The retriever then looked into the camera.

The recorded Grady barked. The real-life Grady raised his head a little and stared at the Golden Retriever.

“OK,” Roy said. “I will place an order for ten boxes.” Then Roy said, “You can save \$5 per bag if you order 25 boxes at a time. Would you like to order 25 boxes? If so, bark or say “Yes.”

The recorded Grady’s stare followed the dogs on the website video, and he barked again.

I looked at the real-life Grady. He raised his head and cocked it a little as if saying, “It wasn’t me, mom, it was Roy.”

Then Roy said, “The website also wholesales to pet shops. Pet shops get an additional \$15 dollar per bag discount if they order 250 boxes at a time. Is this order being placed for a pet shop? If so, bark or say “Yes.”

The recorded Grady, still watching the video clips of dogs chasing each other, barked.

“OK,” Roy said, “I am placing an order for 250 boxes of Golden Royal King formulation dog food, free delivery, at a net cost of \$55 per bag, 500 bags for a total of \$27,500. If you would you like to confirm this order, bark, or say “Yes.”

The recorded Grady barked.

“May I use the credit card on file with your computer for payment? If so, bark or say “Yes.”

Guess what the recorded Grady did? He barked.

The real-life Grady lay his head on his paws. Without moving his head, he turned his eyes toward me, then toward Pat, then toward me again as if to ask, “How much trouble am I in?”

“Your order is confirmed,” Roy said. “Is there anything else I can do for you?”

By that time, the recorded Grady had lost interest in the TV and lay in a sunny spot to take a nap.

“Do you understand what happened now?” Pat Shore asked.

“I do,” I said.

“What do you think?” she asked.

I said, “In the end, artificial intelligence will kill us all.”

THE END

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