The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Wanted: I Will Listen

By Kevin O'Flynn

May 18, 2011



The Listener wasn't answering his phone the last two times I rang. The first time I rang, the line answered and there was a silence for 10 seconds that may have been the sound of somebody listening — although not with much enthusiasm.

Perhaps his name is Stuart. It's probably not a woman as they don't normally charge for listening.

Stuart was advertising in Bolshoi Gorod, where he appealed to all of those fed up and needing to talk.

"Are you bubbling up? Nobody to talk to?" he wrote. "I will listen. Without using your name if you want. With no stupid advice. I will simply listen," he wrote, saying he was willing to talk between 10 a.m. and 1 p.m. To arrange a place to meet, "Speak, don't bottle it all up."

The only oddity is that the ad talks of money, a rather ridiculous 250 rubles ($9) an hour for the lending of an ear and a nod in the right place now and again.

The ad is a couple of weeks old, so he may be fed up with the fed up by now — but another reason comes to mind.

The name Stuart came to mind as there was once a journalist by that name at The Sun who annoyed his editor, the legendary evil genius Kelvin MacKenzie, known for his abusive rants at staff. One reporter, Stuart Higgins, let the ravings roll over him, as told in the classic account of the rise of The Sun, "Stick It Up Your Punter!"

"Higgy, you take it all, don't you?" MacKenzie shouted as Higgins listened to another tongue-lashing. "You just sit there soaking it all up. ... You're like a sponge."

The next day the paper had an article about "Higgy the Human Sponge," and readers were given his direct line and invited to call. "He can't live without a tongue-lashing," they wrote.

As Stuart got on with his work, he was interrupted with a stream of phone calls from people getting things — heavy foul-mouthed things — off their chest. Some of these were his colleague pretending to be angry, but others were said to be real people ready to give something for the sponge to soak up.

Not that you should feel too sorry for the original Stuart. His listening did the job. He later became the editor of The Sun.

There is also a Russian film called "The Listener" from 2004, starring Mikhail Yefremov, about a businessman who goes bankrupt. After a visit to the employment office, he is employed as a "listener" by a family who get all the things they want off their heavy chests to him. In his case it ends happily.

But perhaps the Stuart in Bolshoi Gorod is the victim of a practical joke, a friend who is fed up with his submissiveness, or his yak-yak-yakkiness. Or maybe he was out.

I'll ring again when in need of an ear.

Original url: https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2011/05/18/wanted-i-will-listen-a7059