

Positive Telephone Communication

For many businesses, the first, and often the only impression their customers have of the business is the one generated by the people they talk to on the telephone. Surveys show that what customers really want is a prompt response by a real person, (not a "machine") who can make a decision.

Given the advances in telecommunications technology over the past two decades, it's not surprising that companies throughout the world have invested billions of dollars in equipment and infrastructure in order to maximize the productivity of telephone communications with customers and prospects. What IS surprising is that some businesses invest so little in training to insure that all of this technology is utilized to maximum effectiveness.

A recent survey of the way companies handle their incoming telephone calls shows deficiencies in most firms' responses that are serious enough to lose substantial business. The survey was carried out by leading telephone-training specialists, who conducted an anonymous 'ring-in' research exercise covering medium-sized and large companies.

The survey revealed that:

- Where calls are handled through a switchboard, as many as 40% of incoming calls are not answered within 10 rings and one in five incoming calls are not replied to within 20 rings.
- When calling through an operator, 62 per cent of incoming calls received no greeting other than the name of the firm, 30 per cent received a brief acknowledgment and a mere eight per cent could be described as helpful in assisting the caller.
- More than 30% of callers reported annoyances including rudeness, being cut off, perceived indifference and lack of clarity in speech.
- In one instance, a call to a major department in a leading bank resulted in 20 rings before answered by the operator. This was then followed by 14 rings to an extension before the telephone was answered by someone who then revealed that the person sought by the caller was on vacation!

QUICK
TIPS

The 5 main frustrations customers experience in dealing with telephone staff are:

Taking too long to answer.

Being put "on hold" and forgotten.

Being transferred and having to repeat their enquiry.

Being answered by voice mail and other "machines".

Not having calls returned.

QUICK TIPS

You can add some sparkle to your telephone voice with these strategies:

Eliminate filler sounds like “ah”s and “um”s.

Use pauses add drama to a conversation.

A smile on your face WILL project over the telephone line.

Vary your pacing, from fast to slow to medium, shifting into high gear to emphasize key points.

Open your mouth wider to articulate words more clearly.

Avoid running words together or slurring the ends of words.

Practice reciting tongue twisters to increase your vocal flexibility.

For many businesses, the first, and often only impression their customers have of the company is the one generated by the people they talk to on the telephone. The economic penalties for not having a customer-orientated telephone approach can be substantial.

Most of your message's meaning is communicated not by your words, but by the way you sound on the phone. The good news is that it's easy to enhance the way you sound. Here are some ideas to help everyone in your organization improve their telephone effectiveness:

- **Project your enthusiasm.** It doesn't do any good to have enthusiasm unless you PROJECT it to the other person on the phone line. From beginning to end, keep your energy up – you don't need to act overly excited, just have an energetic, positive attitude. It's contagious.
- **Record yourself.** You probably won't like it, but recording a telephone conversation is the best way to hear exactly how you sound to people on the phone. Don't destructively criticize your voice; identify areas for improvement. Listen for tone, pacing, articulation and projection.
- **Use powerful body language.** Your body positioning influences the way you feel, and the way you feel controls the way you sound on the telephone. Pretend the other person can see you. Don't slump. Sit or stand as if each telephone call is worth a million bucks.
- **Warm up.** Has your voice ever cracked while you were talking on the telephone? It's because your vocal cords and breathing apparatus haven't warmed up yet. Practice humming, either on the way to work or right before you make important telephone calls.
- **Get out of your "tonal comfort zone".** A message delivered with a monotone is probably worse than no message at all. To master tonality, practice punching high notes and dropping down to low tones while reading something into a tape recorder. Make it feel awkward. Then play the recording back. You'll realize it sounds better than it feels. Do the same thing during normal telephone conversations, and using different tones will eventually become a habit.
- **Say "Hello!"** (or good morning, good afternoon, etc.) Have a warm greeting or opening. Welcome people into the conversation. Don't make them feel as if they are an interruption.
- **Avoid “inside baseball.”** When talking to a customer, try to not use company or technical terminology that they may not understand. Technical terms or industry buzzwords can put a customer in an uncomfortable position.

They might feel dumb because they don't understand you. Or, they may feel frustrated and become impatient.

- **Don't lose your cool.** Even if the customer is angry and rude, stay professional. It's not always easy to keep calm, especially if the customer is upset about something out of your control. If a customer is complaining and angry, let them vent. Ask them questions to show that you care, and to make certain you clearly understand the problem. Be a good listener.
- **Transfer only once!** If you are transferring to someone else, make sure that person is available. If it's possible that the customer will get that person's voice mail (if they're not in) let them know before you transfer them. Don't put the customer through the *hold, transfer, hold, transfer, hold, transfer*; routine.

And one final note – The focus on effective telephone usage shouldn't just be limited to the sales and customer service staff. When everyone from the CEO to the receptionist to the warehouse worker has effective telephone skills, both external and internal communications become more productive. In addition this help everyone within an organization reinforce each other's new skills.