

Step Away from the Telephone, Unless You Have Skills

By Marilyn Suttle

On a scale from one to ten, how well would your customers rate your phone etiquette? Your score is only as good as your next phone call. Here are a few do's and don'ts that will make your customers feel welcomed, connected and eager to come back.

Do's:

Before you talk, prepare. When the phone rings, it's not always easy to let go of the frustration of the moment and offer a pleasing welcome. Your mood shows up in the tone of your voice. Create a trigger to remind you to be fully present. One example is to imagine a mood reset button that is activated when your hand touches the phone.

Add your name to your introduction. It creates a more personalized greeting. For example, instead of "Suttle Enterprises" try, "Good morning. Suttle Enterprises. This is Marilyn."

Offer seamless transfers. When a customer calls with a long, complicated problem, you may discover that it needs to be handled by a different person or department. Reassure the caller that you will not abandon them. Offer to patch them through and explain the situation to the next person in the chain. Make sure that your final words create a lasting positive impression. When you're busy, it's tempting to short change the end of a conversation. Instead, thank them for the call, or express how much you look forward to being of service to them again.

Don'ts:

Don't be aloof or saccharine sweet. Customers have little tolerance for anything impersonal or artificial. When your tone is flat or gushes insincere interest, you push customers away. Express a tone of genuine interest by reminding yourself that customer service is all about relationships, and each call helps deepen that relationship. Talk on the phone with the same natural tone that you use when talking to a friend.

Don't be too quick to put someone on hold. Customers don't like to wait. Instead of MAKING them wait, take a moment to ask for their permission to wait. Once a customer agrees to wait, they'll find it a bit easier. Ask, "Would you mind waiting?" If it will take longer than a minute or two, offer to call the person back so they don't have to stay on hold too long. One minute can feel like forever to the person on hold. If you don't already have it, create entertaining hold messages for your waiting customers.

Don't take a phone message without confirming you got it right. Communication breakdowns can be diverted by taking the extra step to ensure that the message is accurate.

Don't listen quietly on the phone. When you are face-to-face with a customer, it's easy to see that you are listening through your eye contact and body language. On the telephone, silent listening can be interpreted as disinterest. To sidestep that misunderstanding, use affirming sounds like, "Ah," "uh-huh," "mmm," and paraphrase back what you hear as they explain. This active form of listening will let the customer know that you are with them every step of the way.

A Word about Unsolicited Phone Calls:

A couple weeks ago, my phone rang in the middle of a crazy busy day. I picked up and heard, *"Hello, can I speak to the person in charge of . . ."* It was an unsolicited phone call – the worst! I nipped it in the bud by saying, *"I don't take phone solicitations, but good luck with your day."* I hung up thinking I was rather polite in my brush off. The salesman did not agree. My phone rang again, and (you guessed it) he was back on the line. *"I did not hang up on you, so please don't hang up on me,"* he said.

Seriously! After a moment of shock, I decided to be curious instead of offended. I asked him, *"What were you hoping to accomplish by calling me back? Did it offend you that I wasn't interested or did you think that it was a good idea to try to shame a potential customer by implying that I was rude to hang up?"*

Now he was shocked. *"I just wanted you to listen to me so I could tell you about my product."* he said.

I asked him, *"Will you please tell me your name and the name of your business?"* Then guess what he did? Yep! He hung up on me.

Don't be that guy. And if you have employees who make sales calls, make sure they don't respond like him either.

Poor phone skills can hurt your business. Training and emotion-management practice will go a long way in ensuring you and your staff are managing customers on the telephone in the best possible way.

What do you think? What is one improvement you can make today when representing your company on the phone?

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