

Personal Connections

Mastering the Telephone

You have only one chance to make a first impression.

While that statement is something you've probably heard at least 1,000 times, many of us think of it only in terms of meeting someone in person. We fail to realize the importance of that first impression when meeting someone over the telephone.

The truth of the matter is that, when interacting with a customer on the telephone, you must work even harder to ensure a great first impression than you would if you were meeting face to face. Why? Because your voice—and your words—must compensate for the lack of visuals that would connect you with your customer when talking to each other in person.

Here are some tips I urge you to put into practice in order to provide your call-in customers with the best possible service:

- **Answer the telephone within the first three rings, fewer if at all possible.**

The longer the phone rings, the more frustrated the customer becomes. Everyone is in a hurry today, whether it's driving down the freeway or calling a business. When you answer the phone quickly, it not only lessens the chance the customer will be irritated, it sends the message that her call is important.

- **Immediately identify yourself and your company.** You should introduce yourself over the phone just as you would introduce yourself in person.

- **Be friendly.** This sounds simple, but it isn't. Put a smile in your voice. Being friendly—and sounding friendly—helps to offset any negative feelings the customer might have and sets the tone for the conversation that will follow.

- **Have all the necessary resources readily available.** When a customer calls with a problem, the last thing she wants to do is wait while you rummage around, trying to find what you need to answer her question or solve her problem.

- **Use the caller's name.** There is no sweeter sound to anyone than the sound of his own name. Be careful, however, not to over-use the customer's name. Doing so can sound stilted and condescending.

- **Listen.** You can't provide what a customer needs unless you listen to him tell you what those needs are. Because the caller can't see you nod your head in understanding or give other visual indicators that you hear what he is saying, you must give verbal responses to let him know you are listening. And don't be fooled into thinking that the customer can't tell whether or not you are giving him your full attention—or checking your emails.

- **Don't interrupt.** When you interrupt a customer, you send a message that you are not giving her your full attention. It also increases the chance that you will

miss a critical piece of information. Wait until the customer stops talking and then ask for any additional information you might need in order to provide the best service possible.

- **Transfer a caller only when absolutely necessary.** Explain why you need to transfer him, make sure he doesn't mind being transferred, and give him the name of the person to whom he will be speaking. And don't ever hang up before you are sure that the call has been transferred successfully. There is nothing more frustrating to a customer than to be disconnected and have to call again.

Handling telephone calls—and handling them well—is a skill that can be learned. I recommend that you do some role playing that will allow you to develop the skills that will help you create a great first impression, calm a frustrated customer, and quickly and efficiently provide that customer with what he needs. Whether the caller is placing an order or lodging a complaint, a sincere and caring attitude goes a long way to ensuring a customer's loyalty to you and your company. **RO**

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