

Telephone Tips: Part I

by Diane Day, CPF

A business phone should be answered quickly. In the opening seconds of a call you must convey competence, enthusiasm, and gain control. Always answer the phone with a smile on your face.

Begin with a greeting, followed by the name of the business and your name. Don't use "hello" as an opening greeting; it can be confusing. A caller expects to at least hear the name of the company to know they have reached the right place. You gain control by asking a question like, "How may I help you?" or, "How may I direct your call?" Don't rush through your greeting. That may give the impression that you are too busy to take time with the caller.

One of the most important tools you have is your voice. Your voice dictates the message you want to send. Be alert, sound pleasant, have a smile on your face, and speak clearly and concisely. A smile, or the lack of it, can be detected. You can even place a sign with a smiling face by the phone to remind employees how important it is.

Don't talk to other people around you while on the phone

unless it's absolutely necessary. If you do put someone on hold, only do so after you have politely excused yourself.

It's important to let the caller know you are listening. Verbal feedback such as "I understand," "yes," or, "interesting" conveys the message that you are alert and paying attention. If you have had callers say, "Are you still there?," then your feedback skills need improvement.

During the course of a conversation, be sure you understand what the caller is trying to communicate. If anything is unclear, ask questions. And it's always a good policy to repeat any message or information just to verify that you understood the caller. Do not hang up before being sure you know what the caller wanted. Be pleasant and relaxed.

Give the best possible impression each time you answer the telephone. You may not be able to help the caller, but you should convey the fact that you care. Words like "please" and "thank you" go a long way when trying to make the caller feel special, so use them whenever possible. All employees should answer the phone with the same greeting.

Many times a sale can be lost by improper telephone manners.

Anyone calling your company forms an impression within the first several seconds of the conversation. You may be losing business because you are not using your telephone to its full advantage.

Convey an air of confidence. You and your employees should know how to handle each technical aspect of your phone system. With one wrong transfer or disconnection, your competence level can drop in the eye of the customer. Be considerate of the caller's feelings, even if you disagree with what they are saying.

Tell your employees that if they don't know the answer to a caller's inquiry, go to someone within the shop who does. Try to satisfy the caller and commit yourself to doing your best.

Don't let an angry caller cause you lose control of the conversation. Respond to the root of the problem, not to the tone of the caller. Always try to be enthusiastic and positive. Hopefully some of it will rub off on the caller.

When you are extremely busy, it may be recognizable in your voice. You might tend to be short or flustered by the most simple request from a caller. Remember, if a job becomes more than you can manage, keep a positive attitude.

Inform the caller that you are unable to give them the attention they deserve. Take down their name and number and return their call as soon as possible. ■

