



Reprinted from the August 2011 issue of BIC

Top five business phone techniques

Recently, I was strolling through a family owned business for which I was performing consulting services. As I passed through a work area, I heard bits and pieces of telephone conversations employees were handling. When I mentioned my observations to the owner, he became quite frustrated. He indicated he continues to communicate to his staff, “satisfied customers are the reason his company has been successful for more than 20 years.” The owner said his employees seem to take his comments and suggestions lightly. I offered some tips that might help him impress upon his staff the importance of positive phone customer relations.

Your customers are indeed the reason you are in business. Everyone in your company who comes in contact with customers creates a strong and lasting impression. This perception is critical to the future of your business as any service you render or product you sell. In these days of shrinking profit margins, little things can have a major impact — such as how your staff interacts with customers on the telephone.

Here are five tips that, if practiced consistently by everyone in your business, will distinguish you from your competition and keep your customers satisfied:

- Greet the caller. The way you greet callers is crucial. Make sure each customer is welcomed in a positive, enthusiastic manner. Say-

ing “good morning” or the appropriate greeting for the time of day can set the tone for the interaction. Also, indicating the name of the company and the name of the employee answering can provide a great beginning to the conversation. Keep in mind, it’s only natural for customers to feel the way the phone is answered is the way their business will be handled.

- Present a pleasant tone. Research indicates 60 percent of the impression we make on the phone is the result of the words we say and how we say those words. Keep your tone pleasant and upbeat, and your words appropriate to the situation. The concern shown to customers counts for as much as anything you are actually able to do for them.

- Avoid negative words like “can’t, don’t and won’t.” Would you rather hear, “I *don’t* have any inventory, and the next shipment *won’t* arrive until Tuesday, so I *can’t* get the parts to you before next Friday,” or “The next shipment will be in our warehouse Tuesday morning, and I can have the parts delivered to you by noon”? Phrase the information positively, and tell the caller what *can* happen. Always strive to find a way to help callers, regardless of what’s been requested. Avoid saying “can’t,” even if you are basically unable to help them. Offer alternatives. Find a compromise. Above all, remain positive.

- Stay calm. Avoid letting a cus-

tomers who is upset and yelling affect your response. Steer clear of getting caught up in the emotions of the situation. If you can keep from feeling personally attacked by the caller, then your mind and emotions will work for and not against you. An adage to keep in mind, “Take it professionally rather than personally.” Focus on the situation, not on yourself.

- Apply the LAST technique. *Listen* to the customer to determine his needs and concerns. *Apologize* as appropriate based on the customer’s situation. *Solve* the customer’s problem, or refer to the proper person who can handle the issue. *Thank* the customer.

Never underestimate the power of common courtesy. End telephone calls on a positive note so a credible lasting impression can be made.

Project a positive attitude. Contrary to what you may believe, a positive attitude and a smile can be “heard” over the phone and go a long way in leaving customers with a perception of professionalism and exceptional service. This translates into satisfied customers, repeat business, referrals and increased profits.

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