



Reprinted from the August 2012 issue of BIC

Five winning customer service phone tips

During the past three months, I have been bombarded with emails and phone calls from individuals regarding rude, negative, inappropriate and, in general, “it’s not my problem” attitude received from an employee of a company with whom these persons were doing business. With these numerous comments in mind, I decided to tweak a column on phone techniques I had previously written.

In so many areas of customer service today, it seems as though mediocrity is the name of the game. How unfortunate when you know making a good impression on the phone is not that difficult. Many businesses spend thousands, even millions of dollars a year on advertising, only to have a customer call and be greeted with an uninviting “you’re interrupting me” tone of voice from the person answering the phone.

Basically, 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 just as 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 staff interacts with customers on the telephone.

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

customers satisfied.

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

2. 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. So, keep your tone pleasant and upbeat, and your words appropriate to the situation. The concern showed to customers counts for as much as anything you are actually able to do for them.

3. Avoid negative words. Three of the most negative words are “can’t,” “don’t” and “won’t.” Which 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.

4. Stay calm. Avoid letting a customer who is upset, yelling and screaming 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 is “take it professionally rather than personally.” Focus on the situation, not on yourself.

5. 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 them 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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