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Telephone etiquette: Eight tips for success

A client recently related to me a key reason his company has been successful for more than 25 years is one of his business philosophies: “Satisfied customers are the reason we’re in business.” As you may suspect, I was in full agreement with him. Plus, I added my two cents: A key factor to keeping those satisfied customers is the level at which everyone within the company provides customer service while on the phone, from the front desk receptionist to the CEO.

With that being said, let’s take a look at eight tips that, if practiced consistently by everyone in the business, will distinguish it from the competition and keep customers satisfied.

- Greet the caller pleasantly. 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. Furthermore, mentioning the name of the company and the name of the employee answering can provide a great beginning to the conversation as well. Keep in mind it’s only natural for customers to feel the manner in which the phone is answered is the manner in which 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 can count 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 Wednesday, so I can’t get the parts to you before next Friday,” or “The next shipment will be in our warehouse on Monday, and I can have the parts delivered to you by noon”? Phrase the information positively, and tell the caller what can happen. Offer alternatives. Find a compromise. Above all, remain positive.

- Transfer calls efficiently. When placing a caller on hold or transferring a call, don’t leave the caller hanging. If on hold, check back in within 15-30 seconds. When transferring, be sure to let callers know why you are transferring them. If the wait looks like it may be awhile, ask if they would like to leave a message.

- Take accurate messages. Get the caller’s name (ask to spell when necessary), confirm the phone number and repeat the message for clarification. It’s also a good idea to ask the caller for a preferable callback time.

- Stay calm. Avoid letting cus-

tomers who are irate 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 is “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 him or her 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 exceptional service — being treated with care, concern and consideration. This translates into satisfied customers, repeat business, referrals and increased profits.

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