

Customer Service by Telephone

Chuck answers, “Hello,” in a monotone when Monica Kelly calls to say her television is broken. He doodles as Mrs. Kelly talks; and, when she asks a question, he’s unprepared to answer. Her irritation is apparent, but Chuck fails to take the cue.



When Mrs. Kelly asks for immediate service, Chuck says, “We’re really busy right now. We can’t get anyone over there until at least Friday, more likely Monday. I’m not sure. We’ll call the day before we come.”

As a 25-year customer of the store, Monica Kelly tells Chuck she has had superb service in the past. “Yeah, well,” he says, “this isn’t the Appliance Center anymore. Mr. Bentley sold the company.”

Monica needs service immediately so she tries to work with Chuck. However, when he asks, “What is that address again? My pencil broke while you were talking,” she’s had enough. She requests to talk to a supervisor.

Chuck, abruptly tells her,

“Sure, I’ll get you a supervisor, but he’s not going to say anything different from me.”

Understandably, Monica is upset. When the supervisor picks up the phone, Monica speaks quickly and irritably. He responds, “We’re prepared to fix your machine today. I’ll get a repairman over to your house right now.”

Then he says to Chuck, “We need to discuss how to deal with customers over the telephone.”

What’s Inside

Here, you will learn to

- ◆ use proper telephone etiquette
- ◆ place calls properly and leave messages
- ◆ use telephone technology effectively
- ◆ provide customer service by phone

Workshop
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Telephone Etiquette

The first important contact customers have with your company may be by telephone. Whether you or the customer places the original call, your manner on the telephone can build trust or send customers running to a competitor. The following suggestions will help you generate customer loyalty in every telephone contact.

Answer Promptly

Your rapid response to a call implies rapid service—a characteristic you want to exhibit to all callers—so answer the telephone by the second ring. Customers become impatient when they have to wait three or more rings for service. They begin to think that your company is not interested in them. If they have to wait too long, they may hang up and take their business elsewhere.

Identify Yourself Clearly

Using a positive, upbeat tone of voice, greet the caller and give your name and department. Then, during the conversation, ask for and use the customer's name. It shows you're interested.

Convey Sincerity

Throughout the call, speak in a tone that conveys sincerity, enthusiasm, and a genuine desire to help. Experts recommend smiling. Even though customers can't see your smile, they can hear it in your voice.

Use “Hold” Infrequently

Customers complain about having to wait. When you can't take a call immediately, explain the situation and ask permission to call back or to put the caller on hold. If the caller chooses to hold, estimate the length of the wait and check back

frequently to see if the person wants to continue to hold.

Be Fully Attentive

Give the caller your undivided attention. Eliminate distractions by turning away from noises, closing a door, or simply concentrating intently.



Listen Actively

Just as you sometimes read between the lines to understand the full message of a letter, listen between the lines to determine what the caller wants. Ask questions, and restate or summarize the customer's answer.

Communicate Clearly

Be polite, professional, and considerate when you speak. Use correct grammar, eliminate slang, and use visual, descriptive words. Because the caller can't see you, you can't depend on body language to convey your meaning.

As you speak, try to mirror the customer's style. If customers want just the facts, eliminate small talk. If they want to chat, engage in friendly conversation. Take notes and refer to them during the conversation. Remember, what you say and how you say it will affect how the caller feels about your company.

Refrain from Familiarity

Many people are offended when strangers or casual acquaintances are overly familiar; they especially dislike being called by their first name. Use Mr., Mrs. or Ms. in most telephone conversations with customers.

Demonstrate Self-Confidence

Customers feel reassured when you display confidence. Therefore, you should speak confidently—even though you may feel less confident than you sound.

Satisfy without Transferring

Being transferred from person to person is frustrating. Each transfer increases customer annoyance. When you must transfer a call:

- ◆ Dial the person the customer needs to speak with and briefly explain the customer's situation before you transfer the call.
- ◆ If that person isn't available, tell the customer when you think the call will be returned. Then pass along a detailed message.

Return Calls Promptly

When appropriate, call a customer back to confirm that a promised action was taken. Use the opportunity to provide additional service.

Soothing Upset Customers

You've already learned how to satisfy an unhappy customer. The same techniques apply whether the customer is standing next to you or is talking on the phone. As a reminder, let the customer vent, show empathy, then try to solve the problem. Above all, don't argue.

Telephone Don'ts

- ◆ Don't sound disinterested or aloof.
- ◆ Don't shuffle papers; customers will think you're disorganized or bored.
- ◆ Don't eat or drink while on the phone.
- ◆ Don't answer questions from coworkers while talking to a customer.
- ◆ Don't use slang, like "yeah" or "gonna."
- ◆ Don't talk too loudly. A loud voice can be interpreted as anger.
- ◆ Don't interrupt.
- ◆ Don't put the caller on hold unless absolutely necessary, and never do so without obtaining the customer's approval.

ACTIVITY 7.1

NAME _____

Answering the Call

Read the following four situations and briefly summarize what you will say. Then with a coworker or another student, role play one of the situations. Have others critique your role play, explaining what you did well and how you might improve.

1. You're an editor for *Sports Press*. The receptionist puts a call through to your extension by mistake. The caller wants to know whether the book she ordered has been shipped. You have to transfer the call.
2. You work in the Men's Department. A customer calls to ask if you have any suits appropriate for her elderly father, who dresses conservatively, wears muted colors, and dislikes anything flashy.
3. You answer phones in a pediatric physician's office. A mother calls and wants to talk to the doctor immediately, but the doctor is with another patient.
4. As a landscape installer, you receive a call from a customer who says her bushes were planted in the wrong place.

Guidelines for Placing Calls

When you call customers—whether it’s to introduce a new product, conduct market research, or for any other purpose—follow these important guidelines:

- ◆ Be well prepared. When you’re clear about the important points you need to make, you can concentrate on listening to the customer. If you have a script to follow, practice it until you’re comfortable. Be prepared to discard the script if the customer’s answers don’t match what you anticipate.



- ◆ Identify yourself by giving your name and company. Explain why you’re calling and ask whether this is a good time to talk. If it isn’t, ask when you can call back.
- ◆ Sit up straight. It will help you stay alert.
- ◆ Speak sincerely, pleasantly, and considerately—like you’re talking with a friend.

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Be crisp, be clear,
and don’t waste time.

— LETITIA BALDRIDGE

Author, *New Complete Guide
to Executive Manners*

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- ◆ Value the customer’s time.
- ◆ Encourage the customer to talk, especially if the purpose of your call is to get the customer’s input on a product or service. The less you talk, the more you’ll learn. Try to see things from the customer’s point of view.
- ◆ Take notes. Ask open-ended questions to obtain further information. Don’t assume you know what the customer is trying to say. Don’t interrupt.
- ◆ Use words such as “I understand” and “I see” to show that you’re listening. Listen for the customer’s feelings as well as the facts.
- ◆ Restate what the customer has said, using different words, to verify that you’ve understood correctly.
- ◆ Thank the customer for his or her time.

Let Your Fingers Do the Dialing

No matter how busy you are, place your own calls. Having an assistant place the call implies the customer is not important enough for you to place the call yourself.

Leaving Messages

When you need to leave a message, state your name, company, and phone number slowly and clearly. Spell your name if it's unique, then explain the reason for your call, speaking confidently and professionally.

If what you have to say is negative, don't leave it as a message. Instead ask the customer to call back by a certain time and follow up if you don't receive a return call.

Telephone Technology

Today's telephones are convenient, fast, and efficient, but they can be irritating to customers. Turn your land line or cell phone into a customer-friendly tool by following these guidelines.

Speakerphones

Speakerphones can be useful when several people in your company need to participate in a call. In such cases, advise the caller of the speakerphone and introduce the people who will take part in the call. If some individuals are working remotely, make sure connections are clear.

Refrain from using a speakerphone when you and the customer are the only speakers. The sound from a speakerphone is often awkward and hard to hear.

Cell Phones

Cell phones allow you to conduct business away from your work site, but they should be turned off when you are with a customer. A ringing phone can destroy the mood set by a good conversation.



Voice Mail

Change your voice mail greeting daily to specify the date, indicate whether you are in the office, and state when you can return calls. If possible, give callers a way to reach you in an emergency. If that is not an option, provide the name and number of someone who can help.

Whatever telephone features you use, know how to use them. Customers lose confidence when employees cut them off when transferring their call or disconnect them when they are on hold.

Great telephone service means using technology intelligently so you can show callers you care and are willing to do your best to help them.

—ROBERT COFFIN

Business analyst

The Telephone as a Customer Service Tool

Fifteen years ago, who would have thought that someday people would be able to call their bank, access automated service, get their account balance, learn the amounts of their last ten withdrawals, make a loan payment, and transfer funds to another account—all without ever speaking to a live person?

The Call Center

When customers call a large company, they typically dial a toll-free number that connects them with an automated response system at the company's call center. This is a location—often far away from the company headquarters or store, perhaps in another country—where employees take orders, answer questions, provide information, and handle complaints.

In a recent study, 86 percent of the companies surveyed provided a toll-free number, and the percentage keeps increasing. For customers, toll-free numbers show that the company wants to hear from them. Customers also appreciate the speed, convenience, and after-hours access that toll-free numbers and automated response systems provide.

Companies benefit from toll-free numbers, too. They result in more customer calls, with each call representing an opportunity to build a new or stronger relationship. They allow companies to respond to customers more quickly and at a lower cost—as much as 50 percent lower—than they can by mail.

Although toll-free numbers and automated response systems have great potential, they can turn customers away when they are not customer friendly. If you've ever gotten caught in an automated system without any way to reach a human being, or had to wait too long to speak with a live person, you know

how annoying poorly designed technology can be.

If you are the person a customer ultimately reaches after navigating an automated response system, identify yourself and your department right away, so the customer knows whether he or she has

reached the right person. Then be courteous and professional. You are the voice of your company to your customers. You want them to know that they've reached someone who wants to help and has the know-how to do so.



Telemarketing

Telemarketers are people who call potential customers to promote merchandise or services, conduct market surveys, ask for donations to charitable causes, or arrange appointments for sales demonstrations. Armed with a list of names and telephone numbers, they call many people each day.

Because telemarketers need to reach potential customers while they are at home, they often place calls at inconvenient times, such as during or after dinner. If you make telemarketing calls, explain your

reason for calling and ask whether it's a good time to talk. If it isn't, ask when you may call back. Refrain from being overly friendly. To you, the customer is Mr. and Ms. Kapner.

Telemarketers typically work from a script, but they are instructed to change the wording to relate to individual customers and to keep their pitch sounding fresh. If you work as a telemarketer, you need to be able to "read" the customer's style and use language that matches.



Companies Use Toll-Free Numbers to...

- ◆ Enhance their image.
- ◆ Become more aware of problems and benefits of their products and services.
- ◆ Quickly solve problems.
- ◆ Answer questions about products, services, warranties, and more.
- ◆ Provide advice about product usage.
- ◆ Take orders.
- ◆ Promote new products.
- ◆ Acquire customer data.
- ◆ Survey customers about product and service satisfaction.
- ◆ Question customers about what they want and need.

ACTIVITY 7.2

NAME _____

Choose Your Words!

As a telemarketer, you've been given a written script to follow when you call customers. However, your employer wants you to occasionally substitute some of your own words to make the conversation seem more personal. With some customers you use more sophisticated words than with other customers. Match the words in Column 1 with the words that mean the same in Column 2. Then, in Column 3, come up with another synonym for the word in Column 1.

_____ old	a. semi	_____
_____ problem	b. miniature	_____
_____ well	c. difficulty	_____
_____ area	d. annual	_____
_____ strong	e. vicinity	_____
_____ thick	f. healthy	_____
_____ yearly	g. powerful	_____
_____ half	h. dense	_____
_____ small	i. mature	_____

i, c, f, e, g, h, d, a, b

Polling Customers by Phone

Small and large businesses understand the value of telephone surveys for gaining valuable information from customers and potential customers. Not only do telephone surveys take less time for customers to complete than written surveys, but they tend to provide more accurate information and have a better response rate. In addition, customers can be asked to provide more detailed information or to clarify responses.

Telephone surveys may be highly sophisticated instruments, with all sorts of data analyzed by computer, or they may be as simple as asking questions when you speak with customers on the phone. In your job, you may be asked to conduct phone surveys to determine what your customers think of your company's service, to assess what customers need but aren't receiving, or even to poll constituents about voting preferences.

ACTIVITY 7.3

NAME _____

How Are We Doing?

Imagine that you work as a computer technician for an Internet service provider. You've been asked to write questions for a telephone survey to determine how your company can improve service. Brainstorm with your classmates or coworkers to come up with questions that cover a range of service issues. Then list five questions in the spaces provided. Remember to use open-ended questions whenever possible.

1.

2.

3.

4.

5.



GETTING CONNECTED

For a helpful summary of proper business land line and cell phone etiquette, visit the Website below:

<https://myqss.link/Phone-Tips>

WORKSHOP WRAP-UP

- Proper phone usage is a powerful tool for building rapport with customers.
- When customers call, answer promptly, identify yourself clearly, and show sincerity, enthusiasm, and a genuine desire to help.
- When you call a customer, focus on listening, so you learn the customer's point of view.
- Customers feel more comfortable when you mirror their conversational style.
- No matter how sophisticated a company's telephone technology, most customers still want to talk with a helpful, knowledgeable employee.