

Tips for Effective Telephone Use

By June Campbell

The lowly telephone is an indispensable item of business equipment. Still, if improperly used, this necessary item can cause client dissatisfaction or loss of customers. Keep these tips in mind to use your telephone to the best advantage:

1. Telephone technology can create the illusion that you are running a much bigger operation than you actually are. **BUT** if you don't know how to use the technology properly, you will create instead the illusion of incompetence. Spend some time practicing and do this as often as necessary to help you remember those little-used procedures.
2. Consider using **earphones** instead of speakerphones. Speakerphones subject the caller to an annoying echo that makes it difficult to hear clearly.
3. **Ask a caller's permission before putting them on hold.** Studies indicate that callers become annoyed after being on hold for 17 seconds. Reduce their annoyance by asking permission, explaining why they are being put on hold and by giving an estimated time that will elapse before you return.
4. Answer the phone with your **business name and your own name.** For example, "Hello. Jones Catering. This is Sandra Jones." If answering a call that has been transferred to you, answer with your name. Mistakes in transferring calls occur often enough that callers have little faith that the person saying "Hello" is really you.
5. Ensure that **no more than four rings elapse** before the call is directed to voice mail. If the phone is to be answered in person, try to answer in two rings. Avoid leaving a phone ringing indefinitely without answering. If switchboard operators leave their post for even a short time, ensure that incoming calls are switched to voice mail.
6. Customers arriving in person have priority over telephone customers. When talking to a customer in person, allow voice mail to pick up the phone call, or ask someone else to answer. When a customer arrives while you are talking on the phone, ask to place the caller on hold, then address the walk-in customer.
7. If you are using an 800 number, **find out precisely what areas or countries can reach you using that number.** Post that information on your web site or wherever the number is advertised. Be sure that your representatives don't respond to email messages with an invitation to call an 800 number that the customer cannot use.

8. Give a thought to **time zones** before phoning a customer or potential customer. If you're on the East coast of North American, that 9:00 AM phone call you place to a customer on the West Coast will wake them up at 5:00 AM. Or, if it's a B2B call, your 11:00 AM telephone appointment won't work unless you both understand the time zones involved. If you don't recognize the area code that you are calling, your local phone book will usually offer that information. Still don't know what time zone your caller is in? Check the World Time Server at <http://www.worldtimeserver.com/>
9. Be aware that **coffee drinking, gum chewing and cigarette smoking** are clearly audible over the telephone. Instruct personnel to avoid these activities while talking on the phone.
10. If working from home, your business phone must be answered in a professional manner. Many telephone companies offer a service that in my area, is called Smart Ring. You pay for only one phone line, but you have two different numbers -- each with a distinctive ring so you always know whether it is a business call or a personal call. Ensure that your telecom will allow you to use Smart Ring for business purposes -- but most do!

And you do know that your customers won't think it cute when your toddler answers the phone?

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