

Telephone Etiquette-How Phonogenic Are You?

Can you imagine working without a telephone? Can you imagine *living* without one?

How do you answer the phone?

Many people answer the phone haphazardly. Some identify themselves with first names; some (especially former military personnel) with last; others, with both. And some don't bother to identify themselves at all. You may even hear an occasional "Yo!" or "Yeah!" from the McManners generation.

In developing appropriate phone-answering skills, it's important to remember that the words you choose set the tone for the conversation that follows. So it's always to your benefits to choose the words that will get your conversation off to a good start.

Answering company phone

As some people already know, but nearly not enough recognize, your company receptionist is one of the most important people on your staff. Why? Because he or she is the gatekeeper for every single call goes through your switchboard. What your receptionist says and how he or she says it are instrumental in the way your company or business is perceived by customers and clients, potentially customers and clients, suppliers, and virtually anyone who, for whatever reason, has dialed your number.

For this reason, I always recommend that a telephone greeting begins with "Good morning" or "Good Afternoon". Following should be a company name and, preferably, the name of the person who answered the phone. For example:

"Good Morning! Customer Service. This is Mary."

Be thorough but compact. Avoid reciting a litany. Callers, especially long distance ones,deprise lengthy greetings.

How your company phone should be answered

If you're an employee, there is only one way to answer the company phone—the way the company recommends you answer it.

In a large office setting, consistency is particularly important. What you say when answering the phone, therefore, should be based on the same format others use when answering their phones. By using the same style, you and your colleagues will project a sense of team spirit and professionalism.

Answering internal calls

If you can tell by the ring of the phone that an incoming call is internal, then it's appropriate to answer, "This is John." If you work for a large corporation and frequently receive telephone calls from individuals you hardly know, answer the line using both you first and last names.

Answering external calls

Whenever you can tell by the ring of the phone that an incoming call is external, answer with both your first and last names.

"Good morning! Weiss Graphics. This is Mary Smith."

By identifying yourself this way, you project both responsibility and authority. Those who answer the phone using their first names only, run the risk of being perceived as having responsibility without authority. It's one of those little business subtleties.

Placing a call

Good telephone manners require that you identify yourself when placing a call.

“Good afternoon, this is Mary Smith of Weiss Graphics calling. Is Mr. Jones available?”

This will relieve the receptionist or whoever answers of that burdensome question, “Whom shall I say is calling?”

When you do reach Mr. Jones, don’t just jump into the conversation. Be courteous and ask whether he has time to talk. Mr. Jones will appreciate your respect for his time.

Finally, a word about wrong numbers. Everyone misdials occasionally. When this happens to you, rather than simply hanging up without an explanation, apologize.

“I’m sorry; I must have misdialed.”

When a call needs to be returned

When you’re not available to accept a telephone call, it should be returned as soon as possible. For some that may mean ten minutes; for others, two days. Return EVERY call or delegate the task to a staff member. Returning calls promptly can pay big dividends.

Getting others to return your calls—promptly

When phoning someone who is not available to take your call, explain when and where you can be reached. The more specific you are, the more professional you will appear to your colleagues.

Winning at telephone tag

Here are some courtesy tips designed to help you save time when communicating by phone.

- When talking to someone with whom you need to follow up, schedule a specific time for the next call.
- If the person you’re trying to reach is not available, explain the reason for the call. Be specific. Someone else may be able to assist you.
- Be courteous to administrative personnel. Ask for their advice as to a convenient time to call back.
- When telephone communication seems to be going nowhere fast, look for alternatives. Drop the person a note or a fax.

Tips for Telephone communication

- Before answering the phone, turn away from your other work.
- Smile when you answer the phone. Even though he or she can’t see you do so, your caller will feel as though you are genuinely interested in receiving the call.
- Let the other person speak without interruption. A sure way to keep yourself from interrupting is to use the pause rule we discussed earlier. Simply pause or count to two after the person finishes.

On hold

When you must put someone on hold, be sure it’s for a good reason, such as needing time to pull the person’s file or answer another line. Ask the person whether he or she will hold and then wait for a response, rather than just assuming that you will hear a “yes”.

How long is too long?

Generally speaking, no longer than thirty to sixty seconds. When you’re pulling a file or answering another line, thirty to sixty seconds seems to fly by. When, however, a caller is

listening to dead silence, a company propaganda, or a radio station he or she doesn't like, that short time can seem like an eternity. Be considerate.

Lowering defenses

When getting back on the line, reopen the conversation with a, "Thank you for holding, Mr. Jackson." By this courtesy you will let Mr. Jackson know you were aware that he was kind enough to give up his time.

How to handle a chatty caller

Have you ever found yourself on the phone with an overly talkative person, and wondered how to end the call without damaging the person's ego? Obviously, gentleness and tact are in order. When returning a call to a loquacious person, preface your conversation by saying something like, "I wanted to get back to you before leaving for my 2 p.m. meeting." With luck, the chatty one will realize you're operating under a time constraint. If, however, you're already involved in a conversation that appears to have no stopping point, wait for a pause and try ending the call with something like, "Well, I won't take any more of your time...." or, "Thanks for taking the time to talk. I know you must be busy, so..."

Call Screening

Have you ever stopped to think that phone calls would never have to be screened of people would simply identify themselves when placing a call? It's so simple. Many people are so preoccupied trying to reach the other person, however, that it often doesn't cross their minds to identify themselves.

First tell the caller the whereabouts of the person requested, then ask for an identification. For example:

"Mr. Smith is in a meeting this morning. May I take your name and number and ask him to call you when he returns this afternoon?"

If the person is in, respond with something like,

"Let me put you through to Ms. Smith. And your name, please?"

With this kind of approach, you may say to yourself, "If I accept calls from every Tom, Dick, and Harry, I'll never get my work done!" While there may sometimes be an element of truth in such a stance, accessibility is the name of the game in business today. Many people try to emphasize their importance by being discriminatory about which calls to accept. Many opportunities have been lost by those who act in this manner. As the late Sam Walton, founder of the highly successful Wal-Mart chain, said in his book *Made In America*, "You have to think small to grow big." Even if you are the owner of the multimillion dollar business today, you had to start somewhere; and it was probably a rather modest start. Way back when, you may have been answering your own phone or picking up a ringing line if your secretary or receptionist stepped away from the desk. Never forget those days. Callers today are looking for service. They value accessibility. When you provide it, chances are your own business worth or value will increase.

The art of transferring calls

Anyone answering an office line should be trained to ask specific questions to better direct calls and to avoid bouncing callers from one department to another. When making a transfer, moreover, you should brief the person receiving the call so that the caller does not have to repeat him- or herself.

When a caller is disconnected

If a company representative is talking to a customer or client, that rep should let his or her fingers do the re-dialing—and fast! If two colleagues are talking together, the person who initiated the call should call back.

Handling irate callers

The person on the phone is hopping mad. How can you abide by the guidelines of your company and still make the caller feel as though he or she come out on top? The courtesy rule that works today is a simple one. Employ the art of good listening. Here are five good listening steps to help you handle a less-than enjoyable caller.

- Let the person speak without interruption. (Again, pause or count to two after you think the person has finished speaking.)
- Paraphrase what the person has told you as a way of letting the caller know you have absorbed the message.
- Be sure to use the person's name (last name, please) a few times during the conversation.
- Explain what you plan to do and be sure to follow through.
- When appropriate, follow up in writing. If you were able to meet the person's needs, summarize what you plan to do in writing. If you have not been able to satisfy the person's request, it's still important that you thank the caller for contacting your organization.

Slash the slang

Easy as it is to fall into the slang trap when you're using the phone, work to avoid phrases like the following:

- *"I'm tied up right now."* Sounds like you're involved in something kinky, doesn't it? Perhaps a more appropriate phrase would be, "I have someone in my office. May I return your call in an about a half hour?"
- *"Hang on."* Just where do you want the person to hang? If this phrase is part of your business vocabulary, get rid of it now. Substitute something more professional. For example, "May I put you on hold, please?"
- *"Bye-bye."* Most of us learned this term from our mothers when we were taught to wave. Instead of this elementary-sounding phrase, substitute a simple "goodbye" or "bye-now". Believe me, you'll score higher.

Voice mail etiquette

Here are some suggestions for lightening the caller's burden.

- Before you record your message, practice it. The terms you use and your voice inflection are important, as they project a definite image.
- Make it easy for callers to leave messages. Request minimum information: name, phone number, message.
- If you're not at your desk to accept incoming calls, check to see whether your voice mail software can route your calls directly to your receptionists. This person should explain that you are unavailable and welcome the caller to leave a message.
- If the caller chooses to leave a message, the receptionist should ask whether he or she would prefer to leave it directly on the person's voice mail system.
- Be sure to use your voice mail box in the manner for which it was designed—rather than as a method of screening calls

When you are the caller

When you are the caller, keep these suggestions in mind:

- Before dialing, mentally summarize the reason for the call in a few sentences.

- Speak slowly. Recognize that writing a message takes longer than saying it.
- Leave your telephone number. This saves the other person time of looking it up.

Speaker phone savvy

Speaker phones are only as effective as the people using them. The important rule in speaker phone etiquette is to ask permission before putting someone on the speaker phone.

By extending this courtesy, you'll probably find that the person on the other end of the line is flattered.

Controlling Call Waiting

Once again, this technological aid can be the source of frustration and resentment in a business setting. If you have Call Waiting on your business line, keep one principle in mind. Asking someone to hold should be the exception rather the rule.

If you find that someone is exploiting you by asking to put you on hold to take another call, be bold and take control. Simply say, "I'm sorry, but I don't have time to hold. If you need to take the call, perhaps you can get back to me when we will not be interrupted."

Cell Phone

Technology and manners are compatible. For example, most Web users are up-to-speed on e-mail etiquette, even Gen Y teens, the poster kids for iPod culture. Wireless users must evolve. Sure, there are handful of folks who must take calls no matter where, no matter what—say, heads of state or expectant fathers. But virtually everyone can turn on the vibrate option, depend on voicemail messages or head for a secluded area before pressing "send".

If anthropologist Blinkoff promises, the mobile lifestyle is creating a "phantom sense of proximity," then we must hew to new dos and don'ts. Here's a 10-point plan.

Don'ts

1. Never take a personal mobile call during a business meeting. This includes interviews and meetings with subordinates.
2. Maintain at least a 10-foot zone from anyone while talking.
3. Never talk in elevators, libraries, museums, restaurants, cemeteries, places of worship, auditoriums, or other enclosed public spaces. Do not have any emotional conversations in public—ever.
4. Don't use loud and annoying ring tones that destroy concentration and eardrums. Grow up!
5. Never "multi-task" by making calls while shopping, banking, waiting in line or conducting personal business.

Do's

1. Keep all cellular conversations brief and to the point.
2. Use an earpiece in high-traffic or noisy locations so you can modulate your voice.
3. Tell callers when you're talking on a mobile, so they can anticipate distractions or disconnections.
4. Demand "quiet zones" and "phone-free areas" at work and in public venues.
5. Inform everyone in your mobile address book that you've just adopted the new rules for mobile manners. Ask them to do likewise. Please.