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Bad phone style can drive clients away

By Jill Haney • May 3, 2009

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Just as employees' dress lets customers know what they can expect, in many regards, so does the way employees answer the phone.

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When it comes to first impressions over the phone, studies show that 80 percent is determined by tone of voice. How your employees answer the phone has a huge impact on how potential customers perceive your business. This means your employees' phone etiquette can impact the bottom line of your business. Now more than ever, it is important that employees leave a positive impression with any potential client.

In a one-week period, I had two unpleasant encounters with businesses I was trying to give my money to. In the first, I was calling to schedule an appointment. As is the trend these days, it took 2-3 minutes to navigate the automated prompts, only to be told to "hold on" once a real person actually answered. It was another two minutes or so before the call was answered.

In the second encounter, I was trying to schedule repair work on our house. Before any questions were asked as to how they could be of service to me, I was informed there was a \$100 prepaid service charge and was asked for my credit card number. In as friendly a tone as I could muster, I asked the employee if, given the economy, there might be a better way to handle this. Of course, she backpedaled, and the conversation ended better than it began. But I wondered if the owner of the company had any idea how his employees were treating potential customers.

A few guidelines can prevent such experiences:

Smile. "Turn that frown upside down," as I tell my children. It is difficult to have a rude tone when smiling.

Ask permission before putting a caller on hold. If you really want to showcase proper phone etiquette, wait for the reply. That seems to be unheard of these days.

Don't answer the phone with a mouthful of food or drink or while chewing gum.

Enunciate. Speak clearly and distinctly. Be courteous to people on the other end of the line. You might be the only contact a person will have with your company.

Say "please" and "thank you" whenever possible.

Poor telephone skills are rampant. And I know that when every dollar counts and I am limiting the money I spend, I expect good service. If I don't receive it, I will take my business elsewhere.

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Remember also that when someone has a pleasant experience, they will tell two people. But an unpleasant experience will be shared with 8-10 people. That can make a big difference for any company.

Reach Jill Haney, of JH Image Consulting, at 513-505-2732, jill@jhimage.net, or www.jhimage.net.

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