

Customer Service 101: Phone Etiquette for Small Businesses

A reality of running a small business is being on the phone constantly. Whether you're talking to clients or partners, learning how to behave correctly is the key to leaving a positive impression on everyone you interact with and letting them know you're professional. Providing customer service over the phone can be challenging, but applying best practices can help you provide better service. If you run a call center, learning this etiquette is essential.

"If you are the owner of a small business, make sure that everyone who talks to customers on the phone or answers the business line is trained," said Gail Goodman, president of communications and phone training company ConsulTel.

Training, however, is never-ending. To ensure this, business owners and the management team also need to make sure employees consistently apply company phone policies and best practices.

"Your challenge may be that you can't really identify what it is that people should do," Goodman said. "But when you hear something that's wrong, you know it."

To start, Goodman provided the following phone etiquette tips on call center customer service for small businesses.

- 1. Consistency is key.** Have everyone answer the business line consistently. If it's an inbound call, all the customer wants to know is that they got the right number. Your "hello" should be brief. Train staff to mention the company and then their own names. "How can I help you?" is assumed, so don't waste precious time adding those five words. "Hello, Mary's Mittens, this is Becky" is sufficient.
- 2. Never interrupt.** Don't interrupt a complaining customer. It can be really, really hard not to do this, but make sure that your team is trained to listen to the whole problem, no matter how long it takes. Even if call center employees will eventually hand off the call to another member of your staff, listening to the whole story is important so the customer feels taken care of.
- 3. Get to know the hold button.** Does everyone know how to use your phone system? The hold button is your friend. Never put the phone to your chest to muffle the mouthpiece so you can speak among yourselves. Clients may hear things you don't want them to hear.
- 4. Then get to know the transfer button.** You need to know how to transfer someone to another member of the team. Say to the client, "The best person to handle this is Jane, so I'm going to transfer you." If it's going to take time for you to locate Jane or explain the problem to her, tell the client it'll be a while. For instance, say, "It will take me about three to four minutes to get Jane up to speed, so can I please put you on hold?"

Most people will say yes. Then Jane must answer the phone with some knowledge of the problem, not starting from square one.

5. Keep customers informed. It's very, very important to train your team on this. They have to give the client a list of what they're going to do, then a longer timeframe than necessary. Why? Because when you fix the problem in less time than you stated, they know you went to bat for them. You'll have a loyal customer at that point. Take longer than you said and they're steaming mad.

For example, say, "Mrs. Smith, here's what I'm going to do. After we hang up, I'll immediately call the supplier. It may take me a day or more until I reach the right person. Then I'm going to tell them I need another widget for you in Emerald Green. The shipment of that to our store may take another week. At that point, I will call you, and you can come pick it up or decide to have me ship it. In the meantime, I'm sending you a return label to send back the damaged item. I am hoping to get a new one for you within two and a half weeks. I'll call you when it's here."

6. Smile when you talk to customers. We all know you can hear a smile, so make sure that your team sounds happy to talk to customers. If staff members sound dour, it is worse on the phone, since the client does not see body language. Words and inflection over a phone are much more important than in a face-to-face encounter.

7. Learn how to handle angry and abusive people. First, don't tell someone to calm down. No one wants to sound like a crazy person, but when a client is that mad, they can't help it. It's going to sound counterintuitive, but your customer service person should speak in a slightly louder voice initially if the customer starts out loud. Their words should be reassuring, like "how awful," "you're absolutely right to be upset" or "I can't believe this – how terrible." The client will feel understood. Slowly, the caller's voice will resume normal volume, and the customer service rep should once again mimic the client's volume. Once the customer is quieter, you can use technique No. 5 to describe how you will solve the problem.

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