

By Bill Guertin

The 800-Pound Gorilla

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Some Guy In Cleveland Thinks I'm A Jerk

Has someone from a local business been surprisingly rude to you on the telephone lately?

You're not alone.

Telephone etiquette is one the least understood and the most commonly abused form of customer service in existence today. A recent survey by the group Public Agenda found that 88% of people said they often or sometimes come across people who are rude or disrespectful. And many people who are guilty of it have no idea that they're offending anyone.

I believe part of the problem is that thousands of employees have never been taught how to properly address others on the phone, or even shown how to use the company's phone equipment properly. The results can be disastrous.

When I was Sales Manager of WKAN Radio, a particularly aggressive rep firm from Ohio called me to run some commercials on our station. Because of some past shady history with this company, I was not convinced that this rep would keep his word, and so I politely declined the business.

He called back again with another rationale, and I politely declined again.

He called back a third time, and this time he got my voice mail. He left a message pleading his case again, and instead of hitting the "disconnect" button, he accidentally activated his speakerphone. When I accessed my messages a short time later, I had a front-row seat to a swear-laced 3-minute rant to his buddy in the next cubicle about what a jerk I was.

Here are my questions to you: Are there things that are being said in your office that you would not want your customers to hear? And how much business do you think you've lost that could have been prevented with a little bit of training on phone skills?

If you don't have a written set of standards, here are some starting points to consider:

- Make sure everyone knows the exact words to use when answering the phone, and everyone uses them automatically. If you have to initially tape the words to each phone, then do it.
- Make it a requirement that everyone SMILE when answering the phone. A company I've worked with actually has small mirrors next to each phone, so that they can see themselves while answering.
- Make sure everyone uses the HOLD button. Covering the phone with you hand is not a 100% filter.
- If you must place someone on hold, use the word "moment" rather than "minute" or "second". Studies have shown that the word "moment" is more subconsciously acceptable as a period of time to wait, because it has no metric attached to it.

- Don't keep anyone on hold for longer than 60 seconds, and for anything longer, it's a good idea to encourage callers to leave a message.
- Understand that some of your people will be better on the phone than others, but the goal is for constant progress from everyone on your team.

You cannot control bad behavior from customers, but what you CAN control is the quality of your staff's communication. And if your people become better on the phone, then your customers may have a reason to be a little less rude themselves.

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