

Use your phone to stand out in a competitive world.

Our rapidly expanding global economy has changed competition from a local contest to an international one. In most businesses, the Internet now makes it possible for buyers to purchase from anyone in any location.

This environment makes it even more critical that you make every contact with your customers or clients a positive experience. It's important that everyone in your business who answers telephone calls or places calls always be gracious, respectful, and friendly. To your callers, the voice on the other end of the phone IS your company.

Good telephone etiquette is simple and easy to follow. The important element in delivering a positive experience is the tone and the attitude you and your employees project when on the phone.

Here are some tips you can go over with your staff to help ensure that your business's phone communications support the image you want your customers to have of your business:

- 1. Never let the phone ring more than three times before answering it.**
Being quickly responsive shows that your business is willing and eager to help the caller.
- 2. Answer with a thank you and speak clearly.**
Answer every call with, "Thank you for calling [Name of Business]. This is [Name]. How may I help you?" This simple statement immediately makes the impression that you are genuinely happy to have them call, you are open to talk person-to-person and you are ready to serve their needs.
- 3. Answer the phone with a smile.**
Project a tone of enthusiasm and a willingness to serve the caller's needs. Answering with a smile ensures that your staff displays a readiness to listen and eagerness to help callers.
- 4. Pay attention to the caller and the caller's needs.**
With non-stop demands on our attention, it can be difficult to completely disengage from what one is doing when the phone rings and give 100% attention to the caller. Yet this is what is required if the caller is to truly feel that the service and attention they are getting is second to none. That is the impression that gives your company a competitive edge. Also, make sure no one in your business ever answers the phone while eating or chewing gum.
- 5. Never interrupt the person while he/she is talking to you.**
This is the greatest listening skill. Not interrupting shows a true interest in understanding and serving the caller's needs.
- 6. Never argue.**
Handling an angry caller is very challenging. Taking a deep breath helps you relax so you can more easily respond to an angry caller in a calm and understanding voice.

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7. Ensure callers that you are responding to their inquiry or need.

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There are times when the person answering the phone is unable to answer the caller's question. At those times, the two most important communications are to ask permission to put the caller on hold, tell them how little time they will have to be on hold (such as "just a minute or two") and tell them why they are being placed on hold. Then make sure they never feel forgotten. That means picking up the line to update the caller on the progress of finding the answer to their question.

If the issue will make the caller wait too long, it's better to ask if you can call them back. Always return calls as promised. When this must be done, always ask for the best number (and an alternate) and the best time to have a call returned to the caller.

8. Maintain a polite manner when answering multiple calls.

As above, when putting people on hold, ask their permission, tell them why you're asking them to hold and get back to them in a timely manner. It's good to thank them again for allowing you to put them on hold when you get them back on the phone. Never appear rushed or frustrated, as this projects the feeling that the caller is an inconvenience — not a valued customer.

9. Maintain the same professionalism when making calls for the business.

When you or your employees are making calls, make sure you identify yourself and always say the name of your business. Address the business issue quickly and directly so as to not take up too much of the time of the person being called. By maintaining the same friendly tone used for inbound calls, you consistently position your business as efficient and caring.

If the outbound call is on a negative topic such as an overdue invoice, never leave the details on voice mail. Just request that the caller return the call and ask for the Accounting Department or ask to speak to the person handling accounts receivable by name.

10. End every call with another thank you.

Close every customer call with another thank you and repeat the company name: "Thank you for calling [Name of Business]. We appreciate your business." If the caller is not a customer, he or she should still be thanked for calling. Leaving a positive impression with every caller — whether the caller is a partner or a vendor — generates good will that can turn into valuable referrals and recommendations. Always make sure the other party hangs up the phone first. Otherwise it might leave the impression that you are anxious to get the off the phone.