

## **How Inviting Are Inviting Schools? School Receptionists' Phone Etiquette**

Martha D. Erwin  
*University of North Carolina, Greensboro*

*Twenty schools, half representing schools selected from the Invitation Education's Inviting School Award winners and half representing area schools in Guilford County, North Carolina, were selected. Twenty receptionists were telephoned and the caller requested to speak to the school principal. Each response was evaluated by the basic criteria of thought to be inviting. Most schools responded within the profile of an inviting school although those that did not did provide an unwelcoming lasting impression.*

In the fall of 1999 I was a graduate student at The University of North Carolina at Greensboro. During the program I was introduced to Invitational Education and the Inviting School Award. As a class project I decided to compare ten schools that had received the Invitational Education School Award with ten generally comparable schools that had not. My comparison was the etiquette of the school receptionist. I was interested in assessing whether school receptionists act in an inviting or disinviting manner towards a caller. The classification "inviting" is based on an elaborate array of corresponding factors (Purkey, 1996). In my study, receptionists were assessed according to variables such as tone of voice and asking to take a message.

In my study, I offered three ideas for consideration. First, I proposed that if the receptionist acts in an inviting manner the caller would feel valued and respected. To respect is to act respectfully. Second, I proposed that if the receptionist acts in an inviting manner the caller would form a positive impression of the school. Conversely, if the receptionist acts in a disinviting manner, the

caller will form a negative association with the school. The receptionist's manner signals the caller that the school environment is inviting or disinviting. Lastly, I suggested that the Invitational Education Award-Winning Schools' receptionists would exhibit more inviting responses than the non-Invitational Education Award-Winning Schools. This was based on the assumption that the Invitational Education Award-Winning Schools must have exceptional, well-trained receptionists for the school to receive such exemplary status. In order to receive the status as an Invitational Education Award-Winning School, a school must exhibit established inviting characteristics.

### **Procedures**

Twenty elementary schools were called; ten of which are distinguished as "Invitational Education Award Winning Schools," located throughout the country. The remaining ten schools are located in the Greensboro area, specifically Guilford County, North Carolina. After the receptionist answered the phone, I stated my name and asked to speak with the principal. If given the opportunity to speak with the principal, I said: "I am a graduate student in the counseling program at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro and am researching school receptionists' manners in answering the phone. I would like to know if you trained your receptionist in answering the phone. And, if so, how did you train the receptionist?" Following the phone call, I evaluated the receptionist using the School Receptionists' Response Form, a self-developed scale.

The receptionist's inviting or disinviting manner was based on a number of factors: (1) number of rings before receptionist answers (2) tone of voice (3) stated his/her name (4) stated the school's name (5) stated "Good morning" or "Good afternoon" (6) asked "How may I help you?" (7) accepted the request to talk with the principal (8) assurance to the caller that the principal would be

on the phone soon (9) stated a reason as to why the principal could not be reached (10) asked to take a message if the principal could not be reached (11) recalled and stated caller's name at any point in the conversation (12) any additional comments by the caller.

Following completion of the above variables, I rated the school receptionist overall as: (1) intentionally disinviting, (2) unintentionally disinviting, (3) unintentionally inviting, or (4) intentionally inviting.

## **Results**

Seventeen of the twenty receptionists exhibited intentionally inviting phone etiquette characteristics. The receptionist for each of these seventeen schools, treated the caller in a personal and professional manner. The inviting attributes were rated appropriate due to the receptionist sending cordial signals such as using a friendly tone of voice. In addition, these receptionists handled the phone call in a technically, proficient and precise style. For example, these receptionists made sure to ask: "May I take a message?"

On the other hand, only three of the twenty receptionists acted in a disinviting manner. Two of the three schools in which the receptionist was disinviting were Non-Award Winning Schools. Reasons for the disinviting rating were based on differing reasons. Primarily, each of these three receptionists acted in an inappropriate style. One Non-Award Winning School receptionist did not say "Good Morning" nor did she ask "May I help you?" Yet, the attribute that was extremely disinviting was the receptionist questioning in a derogatory tone "May I ask what this is about? What is your last name again?"

Another Non-Award Winning School receptionist did not say "Good Morning," did not state her name, did not ask "May I help you?", nor did she give a reason as to why the principal could not

be reached. When I said that I would call back to reach the principal, the receptionist hung up the phone without saying anything in response to my comment. This aloof attitude along with the previously mentioned characteristics came across as disinviting.

When I called one Award Winning School, I received a recording machine. I listened to the pre-recorded voice in order to determine the number to push to reach the actual receptionist. It was frustrating and impersonal to receive the recorded voice rather than receiving an actual voice initially. After following the recording's instructions, I talked with the receptionist, however after I had clearly stated my name and was denied access to talk with the principal, this receptionist asked: "Who's calling?" She asked the question, obviously unaware that I had previously stated my name, the answer to her redundant question. The receptionist had not been attentive during our conversation. This error by the receptionist created a disinviting feeling.

The proposition that if the receptionist acts in an inviting manner the caller will feel valued and respected was found to be true. I felt valued when receptionists treated me respectfully. For example, I felt extremely valued when the receptionist at Button Elementary (no school is referred to by actual name) explained that the principal was out of the office, but continued the conversation by asking: "Is this an emergency?" I felt that I was treated in a sensitive yet professional way.

In addition, when the receptionist at Hilltop Elementary said: "Good Morning" in a friendly, upbeat tone of voice, I felt that she treated me in a kind manner. Many receptionists asked "May I take a message?"; thus, I felt that my call was considered important and that my call would be returned.

When the receptionist stated his/her name, I felt like the school itself was inviting; whereby, the receptionist placed himself/herself

on a congenial, first name basis with the caller. Moreover, after the receptionist at Ferndale Elementary said that the principal could not be reached, she proceeded with the inquiry: "Is there something with your call that I can help you with?" This question was notably inviting, because it showed that the receptionist had a keen interest in addressing the needs of my phone call. This receptionist showed concern, an inviting characteristic.

On the other hand, I formed a negative association with schools in which the receptionist acted in a disinviting way. For example, at Fairway Elementary School the receptionist asked in a suspicious and demeaning tone of voice: "May I ask what this is about? What is your last name again?" I instantly formed a negative association with the school, because I was not treated courteously or professionally. It is not the role of the receptionist to know or inquire about the nature of my phone call. By her asking: "What is your last name again?" I felt as though my name was not important initially. I was not treated respectfully, because she was not attentive to my having already stated my name.

Contrary to my preconceived notion, the Invitational Education Award-Winning Schools' receptionists did not exhibit more of the inviting responses than the non-Invitational Education Award-Winning Schools. Differences between the Award Winning Schools and the Non-Award Winning Schools on receptionist etiquette, as measured by the School Receptionist Response were insignificant.

One possible limitation of the study is that the Non-Award schools were all in the southern region of the United States in areas historically known for courtesy and manners and may have impacted the outcomes. Also, inviting strategies mirror much of better practice in the secretarial field as that profession can also be considered a "helping" profession.

## **Implications**

It is reassuring to discover that the great majority of school receptionists in this study treated the caller in an inviting manner according to the School Receptionists' Response Form. For a school to be perceived as a positive environment, many inviting strategies are required of a number of employees. If a school employs inviting strategies, people in and around the school are valued and respected (Anderson, 1998). Inviting strategies must be implemented in all areas of the school environment. An extremely important component is having a receptionist whose phone etiquette is inviting. The receptionist is a caller's initial contact with the school; thus, if the receptionist has inviting phone etiquette, the caller forms a positive impression of the school. When a receptionist has a kind tone of voice and asks to take a message, the caller feels respected. A receptionist's inviting phone etiquette indicates to the caller that the school environment itself is inviting.

## References

- Anderson, L. (1998). Inviting Strategies From Award Winning Schools. Alliance for Invitational Education. Unpublished manuscript.
- Bloom, B.S. (1976). *Human characteristics and school learning*. New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Johnson, R.G. & Brown, D.H. (Ed.) (1999). *Inviting strategies of 23 Invitational Education award-winning schools* (1). Greensboro: School of Education.
- Peters, T.J. & Waterman, R.H. (1982). *In search of excellence: Lessons from America's best-run companies*. New York: Warner.
- Purkey, W.W & Schmidt, J.J. (1996). *Invitational counseling: A self-concept approach to professional practice*. New York: Brooks/Cole.
- Smith, A.K., Bolton, R.N., & Wagner, J. (1999) A model of customer satisfaction with service encounters involving failure and recovery. *Journal of Marketing Research* [On-line], 36(3), 356. Available: InfoTrac General Business File.

*At the time this article was written, the author was a graduate student at The University of North Carolina at Greensboro. [marthaerwin@hotmail.com](mailto:marthaerwin@hotmail.com)*