

Telephone Skills

eREPORT

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By **Dr. Tony Alessandra**

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INTRODUCTION

The telephone is the lifeline of your business. It's the preferred choice of most customers for contacting your company. Imagine trying to do business without your telephone. It's your single most powerful business tool. Most businesses receive more phone calls than any other form of contact. If that's the case, let's see if we can make a positive impression every time your phone rings.

Remember, there is a real live human being at the other end of the phone who has a problem, need, or a question who needs your help. That's why they called! Let's make certain that we handle each of these callers with special care.

WHAT'S THE NORM?

Think about when *you* call businesses as a customer. What do you normally hear when they answer? Most companies rapidly answer: "ABC Company." If you answer your phone that way, it does nothing to help your company. Seems like in America there is a race to see what company can be the most mediocre. However, when *your* phone rings, you have an opportunity to create a Moment of Magic or a Moment of Misery; it's totally within your power to create either one.

How quickly should you answer the phone?

The rule of thumb is to answer no later than the third ring. The first ring will allow you to mentally prepare to answer. Smile; then pick up the phone and answer. If it rings beyond the three rings, the first thing out of your mouth should be "Sorry for the delay..." then go into your standard greeting.

How do you answer your phone?

Here's a greeting to consider: "Thanks for choosing the Pleasant Company, this is Jennifer; how may I assist you?"

Another variation is, "Thanks for choosing the Pleasant Company, this is Jennifer; what can I do to make your life easier?"

Or, if you really want to impact the customer try this greeting, "Thank you for choosing the Pleasant Company, this is Jennifer; you have my undivided attention."

These greetings send a powerful message to your callers! First, you are saying to the caller that they could have chosen another company, but they have chosen you. So you are really thanking the caller for having discriminating taste. That's good! Next, you are taking ownership of the call by identifying who answered. This makes the caller understand that Jennifer is the current representative of the Pleasant Company. Next, the question, "What can I do to make your life easier?" states that you are there to assist the caller, and that will set a very positive expectation for the call. All the ingredients are now in place to set the stage for a favorable telephone exchange.

You need to realize that the way you answer the telephone is a direct reflection of the Pleasant Company. You are either helping build a good positive image for your company or a negative one. The majority of companies called present negative or neutral first impressions – they have no real energy or sincerity when the phone is answered. This positive first contact will help you stand out.

YOU NEVER GET A SECOND CHANCE TO MAKE A GOOD FIRST IMPRESSION

As someone said, you can't unscramble an egg. This is your moment to shine and perform for your customers. Be very clear about the way you pronounce the name of your company. Enunciate. Work hard on this critical point. I can't tell you the number of times that I've called a company and could not understand the name of the company. I fully realize that you say your company name over and over during the day, but your caller may be hearing it for the very first time.

Get and use the caller's name

If appropriate, after you greet the caller ask, "May I ask who's calling?" There is no sweeter music to our ears than our own names. Everybody wants to feel special, important, and unique. Whenever you use the caller's name, it causes him or her to pause and focus back on your conversation. So use the caller's name generously sprinkled throughout the conversation. If you feel the caller's attention is wandering, use his or her name and it will bring him or her back. Every customer loves their own name and the special attention it carries.

Smile

One way that you create a Moment of Magic for your company is with a smile. You can actually hear it through the phone. There is something contagious about a smile. It resonates with callers. They love it and will love you for smiling through the phone. The only way you can do this is to smile before you answer the phone.

Keep a mirror on your desk

For people whose jobs entail consistent phone work, it's a good idea to keep a small mirror on the desk in front of you. After several minutes of dealing with demanding customers on the phone, it's easy to forget to smile when answering the phone or interacting with callers. You may not notice when it happens, but your callers will! Put a mirror on your desk to remind you to maintain your winning smile.

ATTITUDE

This is *the* major component when answering the phone and interacting with your customers. How in the world are you ever going to create a Moment of Magic with a negative attitude? Your attitude should be friendly, helpful, and enthusiastic. You should have a sincere desire to help. It's amazing how most people will mirror your attitude, but you need to be the initiator. Remember, your value is in direct proportion to your attitude. Would you believe more people are fired as a result of a poor attitude as opposed to performance deficiency? People love to deal with positive, up-beat people who are enthusiastic to help. One of my favorite people always says, "Every day is a holiday, every meal is a banquet, and every paycheck is a fortune." You gotta love an attitude like that!

Enthusiasm

This is where you have a chance to shine. Nothing turns off a caller faster than a slow, monotone voice. We all seek positive energy. You owe it to your callers to answer the phone with positive energy. You will be amazed how people will respond much more favorably to you. Enthusiasm truly is a magic ingredient.

If you need more energy, stand up! Speak up! Increase your speed of speaking and vary your tone. You're creating an image of your firm and it needs to be a pleasant, positive image. Enthusiasm is contagious, so be the director of

the positive image of your firm. It's a way to separate your company from others that are average. Remember, average is not acceptable in today's marketplace.

Who's Listening?

Listen as if your job depends on it, because it does. Here's some simple advice; actively listen to another person for four minutes every day and it will totally change your life. It's tragic, but few people do it. There's no higher tribute you can pay to other people than to give them your totally focused attention. Remember, you'll never get in trouble by being a great listener. The listener is gaining more knowledge, while the talker learns nothing. When your customer calls, make a conscious effort to focus on your listening skills. Your customers will think you're the smartest person on the planet. Good listeners have an advantage in every area of their life.

AVOID THESE MISTAKES ON THE PHONE

- Do not speak too fast. It gives the impression that you don't care. Don't rush the caller. The average business phone is answered much too hurriedly with words seemingly all running together. This creates the impression of impatience and the callers feel they are an interruption. If you've ever listened to someone who is really good on the phone, they are smiling, warm, and friendly – and you never feel rushed.
- A big violation of etiquette on the phone is food or gum in your mouth when you answer. The caller can hear that. The impression it creates is that you are unprofessional and careless.
- Never answer the phone when you are talking with another person. Finish the first conversation and then answer the phone, hopefully before the end of the third ring.
- People before paperwork! Receptionists are usually given multiple tasks to do to make certain they are productive for the company. However, the emphasis is often placed on paperwork ahead of the customer. It is a common business error. Nothing, absolutely nothing, is more important than the customer. If paperwork gets in the way of the caller, you have misplaced your priorities.
- Personal calls. Usually emergency calls are acceptable, but other calls should never come before a customer. Bosses across America are thinking that work is interrupt-

ing the personal lives of their employees. If you have any questions about personal calls, ask about your company's policy.

- **Speakerphones.** Use this function of your phone as little as possible. It may be convenient for *you*; however, most callers consider this to be very impersonal. It's like trying to have an intimate conversation over a PA system.

Incoming calls while waiting on a customer

When you are with a customer and the telephone rings, your first obligation is with your face-to-face customer. The customer in front of you has made considerable effort to get there. They've taken the time to get out of bed, shower, get dressed, and drive to your establishment. Now some guy in his bathrobe at home calls in and jumps to the front of the line? Where's the justice in that? The appropriate action is answer the call in your normal manner and state you are currently with a customer, and would they like to hold or prefer a call back from you. Give them the choice. Then, finish with your face-to-face customer. Then help the caller. Remember to have pen and paper handy to write the caller's contact information. Repeat the information back to the caller to make sure you have taken accurate information.

CALLERS PAY THE BILLS

Let's explore how important your customers really are. Your caller/customer pays employee salaries, pays the company overhead and profits, and keeps your company healthy. Healthy companies provide jobs and support families. Your customer is the reason you have a job! Resolve, from this day forward, that you will deliver astounding customer service. Happy, satisfied customers are your job security.

Live people impress callers

I can't tell you how critical this is to your company's image. If at all possible, always have a live person answer your phone. During lunch hour, many companies go to voice mail. This will decrease customer satisfaction. People prefer talking to a live person. Voice mail is so impersonal. Use it only as a last resort.

Voice mail maze

If you want to find out how frustrating a phone tree (or phone Hell) can be, try calling the Federal Government or a health insurance company with a simple question.

"Press 1 for a wrong answer, press 2 for added frustration, press 3 to hear another set of useless options." Who needs it? It doesn't speed up the process or answer any of your questions. All you've done is raise your customer's blood pressure and heart rate, wasted their time, and given them another emotional horror story to tell their friends and colleagues. Your customers are very much at risk if you conduct your business this way, but it's your choice. How do you feel when you spend 30 minutes attempting to solve a 30 second problem? Don't get me started!

Little-Known Secret

One way to preserve your voice over the course of a busy day on the phone is by drinking warm liquids. This helps relax and soothe your vocal chords and gives you better voice quality. Cold liquids, on the other hand, result in constricting your vocal chords and taxing your voice.

Putting people on hold

Being put on hold is the single biggest complaint that all callers have. Why? Because callers feel like you are wasting their time. Unfortunately, there are times when it's absolutely necessary. There are only two reasons you should put a caller on hold – you are either waiting on a person or you are waiting on information for the caller.

This may seem like a small point, but always ask the caller if he or she is able to hold. Otherwise, take their name and number (repeat it back to them), and call them back. Tell them the reason you need to place them on hold. "Mr. Johnson is on the phone; I don't know how long he will be. Are you able to hold or would you like me to take a message?"

According to a recent study, the average caller will only hold for less than two minutes before they hang up. Cardinal rule: when you put people on hold, you should check back to verify that they are still okay with holding every 30 seconds to a minute. Nothing is worse than putting a caller on hold and not checking back for an extended period of time. This will turn an otherwise neutral caller into an angry caller.

Irate Callers

Believe it or not, this is a fabulous opportunity for your company. Most companies believe irate callers are a reason to put on your bulletproof vest and get defensive. However, if a caller is motivated enough to call your company, they are asking for help and a solution to a bad situation.

The truth is, they are actually looking for a reason to continue to do business with your company.

If the caller is upset, the best strategy is to let the caller vent. The longer they talk, the less emotional they will become. People who are angry want to tell you the whole story, so don't disappoint them. Show them you are listening. An irate caller can be equated to a balloon filled with air; the longer they talk, the more air goes out of the balloon, until their emotion is spent. When the irate caller is talked out, ask this question, "What do we need to do to make you happy?" Let them tell you, and if it is reasonable, get it done. If you can turn an irate caller's Moment of Misery into a Moment of Magic, you've actually created a more loyal customer than if nothing had happened in the first place. Amazing, isn't it?

Negative language

When your customers call and they have a problem or a request, if it is in any way out of the range of normal, the response is usually "No." Telling your customer "No" is like throwing cold water in their face. You're never going to build a Moment of Magic by telling the customer "No." Concentrate on what you can do for the customer and state it in positive terms, such as, "We can get that to you by Tuesday, fair enough?"

Transferring callers

When transferring calls to another person or department, make sure your caller knows with whom they are currently speaking (which should have happened when you first answered the phone), and to whom and why you are transferring them. If at all possible, give the caller a direct dial number to the person you are transferring them to in case they somehow get disconnected during the transfer process. This is perhaps one of the most frustrating telephone mistakes in the workplace. Additionally, before you transfer the caller, first ask if there is something you can help them with.

Screening callers

Too many businesspeople hide behind a gatekeeper. If you really want to stand out as a company that can get things done for your customers, disarm your gatekeeper. Does this sound familiar?

"Hello, Friendly Company, this is Nancy. How can I help you?"

"Hi, Nancy, may I speak to Mr. Jacobs?"

"Who's calling please?"

"Bob Smith with XYZ Company."

After a short pause, Nancy comes back on the line and says, "I'm sorry, Mr. Jacobs is not in right now."

Whether he is or not, most people will assume Nancy is covering for the boss. And remember, not being accessible is a surefire way to lose a customer.

Don't allow misunderstandings to occur

Nothing is more tragic than to lose a customer based on a simple misunderstanding. Try this easy technique. When you feel that a misunderstanding is developing, try repeating back what you think the caller is asking you or saying to you. "Sir, let me see if I have this correct. You ordered Part A and we delivered Part B and you want us to pay for return shipping? Is that what you are asking?" Clarify all details to communicate more clearly with your callers. If anything during the conversation is unclear or fuzzy, make sure you take the initiative to clarify all the details. You will find this to be a huge time-saver for both you and your customer.

Hang up last

How many times have you called a business establishment and concluded the conversation and just as you were ready to put down the receiver, you thought of a very important question that you failed to ask? And all you heard on the other end was a dial tone. Now you have to call back or you just decide to skip it because it's just too much trouble. Don't let that happen to your valuable customers. Always wait until you hear a dial tone from your caller, then hang up. You'll be surprised at how many callers have one more question.

Check Yourself

Unless we hear complaints, we assume that everything is A-OK. That is a faulty assumption. When was the last time that you called your organization to see how your phones are being answered? This can be a real eye-opener for a business owner or manager. If you offer technical support for your customers, try to get through the loop of your technical support and make certain that it is extremely customer-friendly. Don't assume anything. Check up on your company to make certain you are putting your best foot forward.

Telephone Skills

Based on the information we covered during this Telephone segment, think of the three most important items that resonated with you. What will help you most quickly to improve? When your telephone skills are improved, you are more valuable to your company and to yourself. It is a sure-fire way to get a raise in your paycheck. You will be one of those *irreplaceable* people, and your company will be memorable because you are delivering Outstanding Customer Service to your callers.





Tony Alessandra, PhD, CSP, CPAE

Building Customers, Relationships, and the Bottom Line

Dr. Tony Alessandra helps companies build customers, relationships, and the bottom line. Companies learn how to achieve market dominance through specific strategies designed to out-market, outsell, and out-service the competition.

Dr. Alessandra has a street-wise, college-smart perspective on business, having fought his way out of NYC to eventually realize success as a graduate professor of marketing, an entrepreneur, a business author, and a keynote speaker. He earned his MBA from the University of Connecticut, and his PhD in marketing from Georgia State University.

Dr. Alessandra is president of **Online Assessments**, (www.OnlineAC.com) a company that offers online assessments and tests; co-founder of **MentorU.com**, an online e-learning company; and Chairman of the Board of **BrainX**, a company that offers online digital accelerated-learning programs.

Dr. Alessandra is a widely published author with 14 books translated into 17 foreign languages, including **Charisma** (Warner Books, 1998); **The Platinum Rule** (Warner Books, 1996); **Collaborative Selling** (John Wiley & Sons, 1993); and **Communicating at Work** (Fireside/Simon & Schuster, 1993). He is featured in over 50 audio/video programs and films, including **Relationship Strategies** (American Media); **The Dynamics of Effective Listening** (Nightingale-Conant); and **Non-Manipulative Selling** (Walt Disney). He is also the originator of the internationally-recognized behavioral style assessment tool **The Platinum Rule™** (www.PlatinumRule.com).

Recognized by *Meetings & Conventions Magazine* as “one of America’s most electrifying speakers,” Dr. Alessandra was inducted into the Speakers Hall of Fame in 1985. He is also a member of the Speakers Roundtable, a group of 20 of the world’s top professional speakers. Tony’s polished style, powerful message, and proven ability as a consummate business strategist consistently earns rave reviews.

To learn more about Dr. Alessandra and his services, visit www.Alessandra.com.

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If you have found the information in this report useful, you might want to check out some of the other products available on my web site. I would specifically suggest:

Power of Listening eWorkbook

Dramatically increase your EAR-Q!

The difference between “hearing” and “listening” is huge, because listening is a skill that has to be learned, practiced, and developed over time. When you finish this 66-page Power of Listening workbook, you’ll have every tool you ever need to double your listening skills in only a few short weeks.

Resolving Conflict eReport

People naturally disagree about what to do and how and when to do it. However, when differences of opinion are accompanied by too much emotional commitment to one point versus another, the resulting conflict can be damaging. This 23-page eReport will help you identify the sources of conflict and understand how to encourage healthy disagreement without spiraling down into a negative conflict. It will also give you tools that will help you break out of a conflict routine once it has begun.

Interpersonal Communication eReport

It’s almost impossible to be productive and effective today without being an effective communicator. If you cannot accurately communicate, how can you ever expect to get along with other people at work or at home? This 36-page eReport will teach you the essential skills needed to make sure you accurately and effectively receive the messages sent to you and that the messages you send are accurately received through the fine art of asking questions, active listening skills, and effective feedback techniques.

Charisma eWorkbook

From business meetings, to sales calls, to getting your kids to do their homework, to getting help from a store clerk... Charisma gives you an edge in life that few people have. When people instinctively like you, support you, and want to help you, you easily triumph over life’s challenges! Whether you’re running a corporation, a department, a classroom, a volunteer program, or a household, there’s no skill that will help you more than your ability to positively influence others. Once you’ve got it, you’ll have a decisive edge in life... for the rest of your life.

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