

# SAN DIEGO BUSINESS JOURNAL

## When calling a client abroad, put smile in voice

The telephone and other forms of technology are invaluable instruments of communication in North America. We have car phones, cellular phones, fax machines and E-mail. The reason they work so well is that North Americans communicate in a low context or direct and frank manner; what they say is what they mean. Facial expressions and body language do not play a vital role in communications.

Since communications in two-thirds of the world are high-context — that is, conveyed through body language, facial expressions and tone of voice — the telephone is not as effective in Asia, Latin America or the Middle East. The difficulty lies in either conveying or deciphering underlying messages, which can result in a plethora of misunderstandings and miscommunications.

What impression are you giving your prospective clients, customers or patients whether at home or abroad? The telephone is here to stay. It can be a business asset or liability depending on your telephone skills. New employees are immediately thrown in at the deep end and are expected to understand all the technicalities of switchboards, voice mail systems and intercoms without prior training on effective client relations.

In today's competitive business arena, customers expect to be appreciated for their patronage and treated with courtesy. The major complaints of customers calling by phone include; a call not being answered promptly, being put on hold without their permission and then forgotten, or, an apathetic tone of voice from a person unable to answer their questions or concerns.

The first rule of telephone etiquette when making a call is to always identify yourself. "Good morning. My name is John Smith, may I speak to..." Always be courteous to the secretary and remember his/her name. These people can be your friends and may be



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the deciding factor as to whether you get the chance to meet with their employer or not.

Offices are busy places these days and screening calls is standard procedure. Unknown callers feel that, if they do not mention their names, they will somehow get past the secretary. But, the opposite is true. If you do not identify yourself, the secretary, who is screening calls for her employer, will be forced to make an excuse and say "Mr. Jones is in a meeting right now. May I take your name and telephone number and have him call you back?" This of course, will force you to divulge your name, whereas, if you had given your name at the beginning, you would have appeared more professional and courteous.

There is also a right way and a wrong way to screen calls. For instance if you call an office and are told, "Mr. Smith has just stepped out for coffee," or "Mr. Smith has not come in yet." These replies give an extremely unprofessional image of your company and employer.

Instead say: "She's out of the office at a meeting right now, may I take a message?" or "She's on the other line, may I take a message or perhaps I could help you?"

However, courtesy is a two-way street. When a secretary tells you that her employer will return your call, it is a gracious gesture if someone from that office returns your call, even if the owner is uninterested in your product or service.

The telephone should be answered on the second or third ring. This represents efficiency and implies that you are a customer-service

oriented business. Greet the client by identifying your company. Give your name followed by an offer of assistance, "Good morning, XYZ Company, this is Michael. How may I help you?" Do not say "Michael speaking." The caller knows you are speaking.

Adequate message taking is very important. If messages get lost clients get lost. Ensure that there is a pad and pencil alongside every telephone in the office. Keep some in reserve at all times. Obtain all relevant information from the caller, such as the caller's name, telephone number, extension number and area code. Record the date and time of the call.

Upon writing the information down, read the message back to the caller to ensure accuracy. Carbon-copy pads will cover all the bases.

General telephone techniques include:

1. Always return calls within the same day or at least the next day.

2. If you have "call-waiting," and you are on the line with a friend or an associate, it is impolite to answer that "call-waiting" beep, because you requested that they listen to what you have to say. It is rude to keep them on the line while you take the other call. Of course, if you are expecting an important call, it is correct to alert them to this fact at the beginning of the conversation.

3. If you call a wrong number, apologize.

4. Give the call a good ending by saying "goodbye" instead of "bye-bye." We say "bye-bye" to children. Tell them that you were glad to be of help, and to please feel free to call you anytime. Allow the caller to hang up first.

Every customer, patient or client deserves the highest degree of courtesy and regard at all times. Speak to them on the telephone as you would if you were meeting with them in person. Place a mirror on your desk next to your telephone and put a smile on your voice.

Remember that the initial telephone call is that vital first step in your client relations protocol package.