

The complete toolkit for customer skills on the telephone.

Delivering Legendary Customer Service on the Telephone

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Chapter 2

Sounding Like a Winner

You have less than 30 seconds to make a first impression when you pick up the phone, and that impression depends a great deal upon how you sound. Here, we will cover the basics of how to speak well with people on the telephone, with tips and exercises to help anyone improve their verbal skills.

Why Talk is Not Cheap

Human beings are designed so that communication is an experience for all of our senses. When we meet someone in person, we interpret not only their words, but also the expression on their face, the amount of eye contact they make with us, how close they are standing to us, their posture, their hand gestures, and many other more subtle cues. When people joke about someone by saying, “If they tied his hands behind his back, he’d be mute!” they are partially correct.

So, when Alexander Graham Bell invented the telephone and brought inexpensive electronic communication to everyone, he unfortunately threw out all the other sensory inputs that we normally expect in a conversation. This means that when we are on the phone, our voice must do the entire job of conveying both our message and our feelings. By

learning to control the sound of our voice better, we can do a better job of controlling the call as well.

Some of the most common areas that affect how you sound include:

- How clearly you speak.
- How fast you talk.
- Your tone of voice.
- Avoiding extraneous “filler” words like er, um and ah.
- Sounding confident and professional.

No matter what your basic style of speech is, we can learn to manage and control the way we sound with customers on the telephone. The delivery of what we say is every bit as important as its content, and when we speak well on the phone, we have already won half the battle of making each transaction a successful one.

Training your voice

“Gmorning, how cni helpya? Whazzat? ... I dunno. Yeah ... awright, gbye.”

We all have a unique way of speaking, and in some cases, these mannerisms are endearing -- for example, the cartoon character Bugs Bunny was intentionally designed to speak with a Brooklyn, NY accent. At the same time, all of us can learn to speak better, and practicing clear speaking habits have some very practical benefits for you:

- *Greater understanding.* Many problems have their roots in people getting the wrong information over the phone, whether it is directions, account numbers, or whatever else.
- *Fewer problems.* The person speaking above is not only hard to understand -- there is also a good chance that callers will think he is rude, ignorant or doesn't care. By speaking clearly and directly to people, you are also sending a message that you are willing to work cooperatively with them to solve their problems.
- *A better image.* For better or worse, people judge us on how we sound, and clear, competent speech sends a message of intelligence and authority.

Here are some of the ways that you can improve your speech:

Keep each word separate. There is a tiny, but distinct pause between each word of a sentence. The difference between “whaizzit” and “What is it” lies in finding those pauses, and incorporating them into your normal speech habits.

TIP: Practice reading stories from the newspaper, and make it a point to say each word distinctly. This may feel awkward at first, but will improve quickly with practice -- start slowly, and then gradually work up to your normal rate of speech.

Begin and end each word. Besides keeping each word distinct, another key to good diction is to pronounce the beginning and end of each word

clearly. Make it a point to say things like the “s” at the end of “yes,” the “t” at the end of “that,” and the “p” at the beginning of “please.”

Watch colloquialisms. Many people, and many parts of the English-speaking world, have their own unique way of saying certain words: for example, the word “yes” can become yep, yup, yeah, or yessiree depending upon who you are speaking with. Avoid these as much as possible, and stick with standard English words and phrases in your professional speech.

Control your breathing. When we are rushed or anxious, we have a natural tendency to take short, shallow breaths that affect the way we sound. By breathing calmly and naturally from our diaphragm, it becomes easier to speak with an easy, relaxed cadence.

TIP: If you have a tape recorder, practice speaking into it and review the way you sound. Pay particular attention to how you pronounce individual words, whether you keep words and sentences distinct, and how clearly you are speaking.

How fast you speak

Normal human speech is spoken at a rate of about 160 to 180 words per minute. If you go much faster than that, people do not have time to process the information you are telling them. Conversely, if you are too slow, people will become frustrated waiting for

you to “spit it out.” The ideal is a relaxed, comfortable pace that lets you be clearly understood.

The best way to work on your rate of speech is to time yourself reading aloud a sample of text. Try reciting the paragraphs below, and measure how many seconds it takes.

Sample text to measure your rate of speech

I really enjoy working on the telephone with customers. I get to deal with people from all over the world, and the vast majority of them are very happy with the quality of service that I provide them. More importantly, speaking with customers all day gives me a good sense of what people like, and don't like, about our company's products and services. This makes me one of the most important people in the company, because I know more than anyone how people feel about our company and our industry. This makes me the company's voice of the customer, a role that I take very seriously.

The other good thing about working with customers on the telephone is the variety. Every day, there are new problems and situations to work with, and there are always new things to learn. Personally, I see my time on the phone as an opportunity to develop my own professional skills, and improve my life on and off the job. It is one of the best jobs that I have ever had.

How many seconds did that take? An average speaker would finish reading this aloud in approximately one minute. If it took you less than forty five seconds, you may be speaking a little too fast, and more than a minute and a quarter could be a little

too slow. If you feel that your pace of speaking could use a tune-up, then try the following tips:

1. Time yourself. Start reading other materials aloud, and see how long it takes for you to go through the material. Then count the words, and get a feel for how your normal, average rate of speech is improving over time.

2. Tape yourself. By practicing on tape, you not only get to hear your rate of speech for yourself, but you also can judge it in context of how you sound overall. A great tip is to use the “message review” feature of many voice mail systems, to measure your speaking pace when you leave messages for people. If you sound too fast or too slow, re-record the message until you feel good about leaving it for others to hear.

3. Pace yourself. When you aren’t formally practicing, take time to notice the pace of your speech as you interact with others every day. Then notice how others speak, and adjust your own rate of speech to a speed that best fits those interactions.

Tone of voice

Beyond how clearly we speak, our voice also conveys the mood we are in. Our facial expressions, posture and state of mind all show up in the tone of voice that people hear on the other end of the phone. Therefore, it is important to pay attention to how we feel on the inside before we pick up the telephone. Pause, take a deep breath, and smile before you start speaking – it really does make a difference in how you sound.

Another simple technique that can really help is called the “Uncle Bob” rule, and it works like this – whomever you are speaking with, and no matter how annoying they may seem, imagine them as being someone’s favorite uncle when they are off the phone. Our subconscious mind reacts the same to real and imaginary feedback, and by creating a positive mental image of our callers, it makes a real and tangible difference in how we sound, and how we treat people.

Your tone of voice is perhaps the single most important aspect of how you communicate on the phone, because it is the one aspect of speaking that reveals your emotions. How people perceive the tone in your voice can have a major impact on the success, and the productivity, of your transaction. By giving your tone of voice the same attention that you would give to an in-person encounter with people, you will help every other aspect of a phone call go much more smoothly.

Er, ah, you know what I mean

Once, in college, I attended a course taught by a professor who used the word “um” incessantly. His habit was so obvious to the class that one day, a group of students banded together to count how many times he uttered this during a single class session. Eventually, they gave up counting after several hundred “um’s.”

We use “filler” expressions like “er”, “ah”, “um” and “you know” to fill in gaps in our speech, while we

pause or collect our thoughts. They spring from an innate fear that silence will make us look ignorant, or give the other person a chance to interrupt us. In reality, however, they are annoying mannerisms which make us sound worse and not better. With practice, they can be almost completely eliminated.

One of the best techniques for eliminating these filler words comes from the speaking organization Toastmasters International. Their meetings often have one person assigned to be an “ah counter,” and their job is to ring a loud bell every time a speaker uses an interjection like “ah” or “um.” You can also practice this technique in private, with a friend or colleague ringing the bell for you. It is remarkably effective – in time, the fear of being “dinged” leads us to avoid these fillers, and the improvement is lasting.

TIP: Organizations like Toastmasters International (Mission Viejo, CA) are an excellent, low-cost way to improve your speaking skills in a very supportive environment. They also offer contests, awards, and regional and national conferences. You can contact them by phone at 949-858-8255 in the United States, or on the Internet at www.toastmasters.org, for details on groups near your home or office.

As a member of Toastmasters myself, it would not be inaccurate to characterize my own first speech for them many years ago as “ding, ding, ding, ding.” Years later, doing a radio interview for another book, I listened to a tape of the interview and was pleasantly surprised to not hear a single word of filler. Give this technique a try yourself, and you will be delighted at how well it improves your speech.

More tips from the pros

In the movie “My Fair Lady,” a young English woman was forced to speak with her mouth full of marbles, in an effort to rid her of a thick Cockney accent. While we strongly advise against putting hard, indigestible objects in your mouth, there are many other techniques that professional speakers and broadcasters use to improve the way that they sound. Some of these include:

- **Develop a “stage voice”.** A surprising number of radio and television professionals enhance their voice when they are on the air, in much the same way that actors assume the voice of their characters. In these cases, people develop a habit of slipping into their “broadcast” voice when they turn on their microphone or put on their headsets. In the same way, you can learn with practice to speak more clearly and professionally every time you put on your headset or pick up the phone receiver.
- **Learn from the masters.** By listening to other people whose speaking skills you admire, you can analyze what techniques of theirs can be incorporated into your own unique style. Listen to live speeches, broadcasts and audiotapes from professional speakers and trainers, as well as people in your own profession, and learn to analyze what things help them to sound confident and professional.
- **Think positive.** Your voice really does reflect how you feel inside, and that mood can rub off on the

people that you speak to as well. When you work hard to maintain a positive mental attitude, and learn to build confidence and poise on the job, these good things will show through in your voice every time you pick up the phone.

No matter how you decide to work on improving your voice, remember that your voice on the phone is completely unique to you and your personality. As you practice techniques for how to sound good on the phone, and listen to others around you, your goal should be to pick up techniques that fit your own style and personality like a glove.

Finally, remember that the payoff for developing a great speaking voice goes far beyond providing good service to your customers. People judge us based upon how we sound, and how we respond to them. By learning to speak clearly and speak well, we go a long way towards being seen as more intelligent, talented and capable of leadership, both on and off the telephone.

Food for thought

1. What do you feel are your greatest strengths and weaknesses in the way you sound on the telephone?

2. If you could sound like any person, whom would you most like to sound like? Are there speaking habits this person uses that would fit your personality and speaking style?

3. What would you most like to improve about your speaking voice? Based on what you have read in this chapter, what might be your best plan for improving it?

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