

Telephone Tactics

Julia Dawson, Director of Customer Services at Denplan discusses the importance of great telephone communication, and how getting it right can help your business thrive.

I think it's fair to say that the telephone is the unparalleled communication tool of our time. In business too, more and more service sectors are giving people the opportunity to conduct their business by phone. But, good telephone communication is not as easy as simply picking up a phone and talking...it's a learned skill.

Good telephone tactics can give your business the opportunity to be efficient and helpful and also to enhance your image. Minor changes when speaking on the phone can make a huge impact and the following tips are designed to show you how and why telephone tactics are so important.

First impressions

How often have you met someone you've only spoken to on the phone and thought 'they're nothing like I expected'? By making sure that you always answer the telephone and greet your customers in a bright, friendly manner you can ensure that that's what your clients will expect when they do business with you. Also, smiling when you answer the phone may sound a bit silly, but when you smile, the small muscles that raise the corners of the mouth lift the pitch of your voice and add a brighter, more welcoming tone.

Great service will also help you attract new business, as existing clients will tell their colleagues how good you are. A word of mouth recommendation is far more powerful than any advert and is a real indication of how effective your customer care is.

Time wasting

One of the things that often comes up when discussing poor call-centre experiences is being kept on hold for long periods of time. If you're unable to deal with a call straight away, let the caller know you will deal with their query and call them back. This not only makes the customer feel valued, but also allows you to look into more complex queries at a quieter time of day when it's more convenient for you.

During the working day, there are often periods which have particularly high call volumes. By monitoring the calls you can identify these times and ensure you have sufficient cover to attend to them. Automated answering services are also great outside of working hours, but try not to use them during the working day. They may be more convenient for your team, but are often a waste of time for callers, as they prefer to speak to a real person and explain their queries in their own words.

Telephone techniques

When speaking on the telephone, speech and hearing are obviously all you can rely on for communication. As a result, things that interfere with speech such as typing on a computer, shuffling files and eating become more audible to the caller and can make them less important than your other tasks. Therefore, it's vital that you really concentrate on your conversation giving your caller your undivided attention. It's also a good idea to hold the telephone properly – holding it under the chin will give a muffled sound to the caller and will hinder good communication.

Whenever you speak to a customer on the telephone you should always aim to be calm, clear and concise and avoid business jargon that the caller may not understand. It's also really important to listen to the whole conversation, even if you think you know what their query or point of view is. By only selectively listening you may miss important points for both yourself and the caller. Acknowledging their points and statements will confirm that you're actively listening to them and taking notes will help you deal with the call later.

Complaints handling

In my experience, the overwhelming majority of complaint cases are caused by some form of breakdown in communication. However, it's crucial that you listen carefully and show you're prepared to listen; even if you feel you've heard it all before as people generally need to feel they can get things off their chests.

Once you fully understand what the complaint is about - genuinely sympathise with the caller and to show concern about the issues they're raising. All too often people can slip into the slow, monotone speech-patterns we associate with complaints departments, but this does not instil the impression you care about the person's problem. Instead, summarise the complaint back to them to show that you have really listened and appreciated their comments. If you need to check anything, give the caller your name and a firm commitment of when you will get back to them.

Messages

We have all been guilty at some time or another of hastily writing a message on a scrap of paper or post-it and, when questioned about it, being unsure of the detail. Even if a phone call is for somebody else in your business the way you deal with that call is a demonstration of your business's efficiency.

Time is wasted and business lost when messages are not taken correctly or calls returned promptly so it's a good idea to create a specific message form to remind you of all the details you need to note down. Many stationery companies supply pre-printed pads for this purpose or you can easily create your own, but remember that if you're using e-mail to send messages within your business they should include the same information as the message forms.

It's clear that customer service is vital in the office, in the field and on the telephone and it's the constant desire to make each customer feel individual and welcome which will set you apart from your competition. By following this advice, you can not only ensure that your existing customers stay loyal to you, but that you attract new ones through word of mouth and great customer care.

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Julia joined Denplan in 1990, running the Administration department and in 1992 moved to manage the Practice Support and Customer Advisor teams. During 1994, Julia transferred to the Professional Services area, and in 1997 became Head of Operational Development before becoming Head of Denplan's Customer Service division in 1999. Now as Director of Customer Services, Julia has overall responsibility for the Practice Support Advisors, Customer Advisors, Registration and Administration Services, Insurance and Helpline and Corporate Customer Services.