

## Customer Service Telephone Skills

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### *Telephonic Services*

The defining lines between the *telephone* and *telephonic services* are becoming ever more blurry with rapid innovations in communications. We may be speaking to a friend or customer on an actual corded telephone, a smart cell phone, over a tablet via Skype, through any number of computer-based *voice over internet protocols* (VoIP), webcams, online meeting platforms, and other such services. For the sake of this lesson, telephonic communication is considered any type of voice-to-voice communication (with or without a video component).

For the most part, unless there is a camera involved, we have no visual cues to help us better assess the person on the other line. We can't see if they are smiling, frowning, gesturing, multitasking, or playing a video game. This can actually be a help, as understanding the customer's problem requires focus on the specific words spoken and the tone in their voice. Sometimes the visuals can be an irrelevant distraction if we are making judgments based on dress or hairstyle, or if we are misinterpreting facial expressions.

It's important to remember as we speak with a customer telephonically that we are trying to decrease customer anxiety and dissatisfaction, not increase it with some of the frustrations of the technology. There are a number of tactics we can use to put our customer at ease, while still taking advantage of the power of telephonic systems.

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Please spend 30 minutes visiting this website and pay special attention to these customer service features:

*Where's My Stuff? / Return Center / Contact Us / Help Topics Listing*

## *Telephonic Communication Tactics*

Since we typically have no visual cues when speaking on the phone, it is essential we use tone of voice and careful word selection to connect with our customers. We should use a calm, friendly voice to convey warmth and concern—seeking as always to form a partnership with customers to find a resolution to their problems. The tone of our voice should project our dedication to the customer, with enthusiasm and competency.

We should speak clearly using a normal volume, with short words and sentences so as not to overwhelm the potentially frustrated and anxious customer. A good tip is to set our volume, speech rate, and vocabulary level to match those of our customer. Some customers may be quite knowledgeable on a given issue, so we don't want them to feel as if we are talking down to them. Think of a standard rate of speech as about 140 words per minute, or approximately 4 syllables per second (at about this pace: *one-thousand-one*; *one-thousand-two*; *one-thousand-three*—each number string lasting a second each). You may slow it down or speed it up to meet the style of your customer, but it's a good place to start.

For any customer, one of the most frustrating aspects of telephonic services is dealing with the web of automatic menu options, along with voice mailboxes and call transfers. The customer may be overwhelmed and upset by the process of simply trying to connect with *you*. An upfront apology for an inefficient automated system may help calm the first moments of your call.

The best-case resolution to a telephone call is that you are able to quickly discern the customer's issue, describe the options, pick a suitable resolution with the customer's participation, and fix any problem. However, quite often it may be case where you will need to transfer the customer to someone else on your team—perhaps a specialized service worker, a supervisor, or an entirely different department. After your work building an effective rapport with the customer, he or she may find a transfer upsetting. You can alleviate the *transfer stress* with a few preliminary steps.

First, explain the need for the transfer to your customers, and ask their permission to do so. Once again, it comes back to involving your customers through each step as a partner in the solution to their problems. If you need to put the customer on hold, be sure to check in every 20–30 seconds with an update on your progress. If the customer feels ignored, gets frustrated, hangs up and calls back, the process may need to begin all over again at step one—only this time with an even-more agitated caller.

Avoid any transfer where the customer will have to explain an issue all over again to another customer service worker or supervisor. When you return to your customer after

finding the proper connection, be sure to thank him or her for waiting, and apologize if necessary for any excessive delay. Take time to introduce the customer to whomever is receiving the call transfer, confirm the new representative has been informed of the issue, and assure the customer that a resolution is imminent.

Most all of us have been in the frustrating position of working through a company's phone system, being placed on long holds, repeating our issue over and over again with each transfer, and being disconnected during a transfer—only to have to start the process again. It isn't hard for us to put ourselves in our customer's place as they deal with similar frustrations. By our efforts at empathy and with efficient procedures, we can turn the telephone interaction into an effective tool for serving our customer and our company smoothly and productively.

**Summary:**

- Telephone and telephonic communications can include many different types of equipment and connecting platforms.
- In the absence of visual cues, our voice and the voice of our customers become the essential medium of communication. We should speak at a proper rate of speed and volume, with a tone that conveys commitment and competency.
- Ask for permission from customers before placing them on hold, initiating a transfer, and connecting them with a new service representative. Introduce them to the new contact, and inform them that you have explained their problem to the new representative.
- Be sure to thank your customers for their patience, apologize for any delays, and assure them that a solution to their problem is on its way.