

The Guest REPORT

High notes, low notes, coughs, gulps, groans and deep sighs, boredom, rudeness, reticence, enthusiasm, frustration — wait a minute, back up — enthusiasm in a phone call? I was prepared for most of the above but not enthusiasm, especially since today one rarely finds enthusiasm in any phone call dealing with service needs. This enthusiastic individual actually had a lilt in her voice, a sound and feeling that she was happy to be there and to be answering the phone.

Three of the four calls I made featured everything but enthusiasm and I was delightfully surprised when it happened. It was Halloween, and I had made a series of phone calls to different retail locations and attractions. I love this holiday and was in a great mood. I thought my good spirits would rub off on each person I called to see if I could get the costume I wanted, a red M & M, and to make some scary plans for the evening.

In most cases, I was greeted without a greeting, exasperation and annoyance, and even given the runaround. One operator kept transferring me to departments that were closed instead of answering my simple question. I called back three times before I was able to get her to answer my question about an event happening that night. In other words, I had to work very hard to send them the business their marketing messages said they wanted.

I started off excited to talk to the voices in the midst of this Halloween atmosphere. But most of the voices did not share my excitement and in fact, spooked me into a feeling of despair.

They seemed annoyed with my call, not interested in my desires and apparently frustrated that they had to even answer the phone at all.

Then, there was the lilt, the breath of fresh air, the voice with excitement, interest and helpfulness. She sensed my holiday happiness and fed me even more. I didn't get her name, but she became famous to my ears that day. She cared, she responded, she focused and she appreciated. I was not just a number, but a customer that got her full attention in that moment. She smiled through the phone. I could feel it in her voice. She answered my questions and added a little magic to my Halloween. I was grateful and amazed that one voice could actually ease the anxiety produced by the other calls. What made her different and why?

Consider what service moments happen or don't happen when the phone rings:

■ The Rush Syndrome:

The busy receptionist who can barely breathe or say the company's name, transfers before callers finish their request, and rushes to get the next call. He or she is so absorbed in the task and desire to be efficient that the caller is left with a cold introduction, an abrupt transition and a poor first impression.

The Solution:

Focus on each word that a receptionist should say and understand the impact of cheating on those words. A greeting, said sincerely and not because of company policy, is essential. Instill a mantra of first touch, first impression and let your frontline phone team know how important its role is. Listen thoroughly to the caller's request before moving them on to the next step and then let them know it is a pleasure to do so. Even when phones are ringing off the hook, don't compromise the message and especially the impression. Address extra phone coverage or another way to capture calls.

Service excellence Was that a lilt in your voice?

■ Everything but the kitchen sink:

How about those calls that allow callers to hear coughing, wheezing, burps, gulps, yawns and sighs? These messy sound effects often take place in longer processing calls, order fulfillment, call centers and transactions. They really take away from the business at hand and may cause a caller to hold the phone far away or miss valuable information. Callers may also feel more anxious due to a perceived lack of attention or interest.

The Solution:

Recognize that any phone call is actually an ear recital. The audience has paid full price to attend and is listening to everything. If one of these unfortunate sound effects is imminent and cannot be controlled, cover the mouthpiece with a hand or hold it away from the sound-producing orifice. Show the caller that healthy attention is coming their way and that minding their business is the business at hand.



■ See no phone caller, hear no phone caller, speak to no phone caller:

Just because a caller is not seen does not make it OK to put forth minimal effort. Witness call recipients who sound thoroughly annoyed, do not want to take an ounce of extra effort and banish callers to someone else's oblivion. Since they don't see the caller, since it's not their department and since they have these wonderful transfer buttons, they abdicate the throne of caller contact. Thinking the job is done and thankful to have removed one more caller from the day, imagine the interaction that takes place when that same caller calls back, now frustrated, anxious and wanting to talk to a supervisor. This transfer trauma results in bad vibes for the company and more personnel involved to calm that caller down and to finally meet the original need or request. Attitude and effort could have resulted in a better win for everyone.

The Solution:

Do not transfer any call until it is certain that the caller will get where they need to go. Today's consumers are terrified to enter the land of eternal hold or to enter the maze of voice mail. Prepare callers for options and what may take place when the call moves on. Give them alternatives to get back to the main line or directly get to someone else they need. Assure them that the call is important and communicate a caring attitude through each vocal chord. Take responsibility and make the effort to make the connection.

■ The Moody Blues:

Back to the lilt. What a difference a mood makes in the delivery of any message. Callers can tell if the person on the other end is having a good or a bad day, just by the tone of the voice. Inspection of inflection can prevent caller infection. Most businesses would like to represent their frontline of phone contacts as those that are happy to get calls and in turn the business. As many telephone consultants advise, keep a mirror handy and examine the mood projected during each answered call. Most callers would be delighted to hear the energy of enthusiasm, the power of professionalism and the sincerity of a smile, ringing service excellence off the hook.

ROBERTA NEDRY is the president of Hospitality Excellence, consultants in guest experience management and service excellence and an advisor to the Business Journal's Guest Report.

She can be reached at (954) 739-5299 or roberta@hospitalityexcellence.com.