

"Can I tell him who is calling?"

September 18, 2008 - Construction Design & Engineering

Without a doubt, the manner in which companies handle their telephone communication is one of the most overlooked and abused areas in business. It's also among the easiest to correct and for which assistance is readily available. Why, then, don't we do a better job?

Take, for example, the "I'll see if he's in," or "Can I tell him who's calling?" strategy. Might as well just say "I've got to check to see if you're important enough for him to talk to." Or what about being left on hold for an interminable length of time, being cut off or being switched to the wrong person? The list goes on and on. You don't need me to remind you—you encounter it every day!

Of course, we all know these practices don't go on in our office. Or do they? Don't ever assume—make sure! Monitor the system. If you're out of the office, call the office with a typical request or problem, and see how it is handled. Have someone impersonate an irate client who's not received what's been promised. See how the situation is dealt with.

The idea is not to catch people. If you do find someone who responds in an unacceptable manner, don't reprimand them. Their action is most likely an indication that you haven't done your job well in preparing them to handle the situation properly. Get them some training.

How many firms truly recognize that their receptionist is a key employee? Much too little consideration is given to the hiring and training of that position, and it's almost always underpaid. Remember, this is the first representative of your company that potential clients, customers, investors, business associates and others are usually exposed to—and we all know how important first impressions are.

Spend a few bucks more than the market is paying to attract someone who will actually THINK a little bit, someone who understands the importance of the job and how to do it. Or find an individual with the right attitude and send them for some serious training before you put them on the phone.

Another major mistake many employers make that tends to undermine a receptionist's effectiveness is to attempt to use that person for too many functions beyond that of a receptionist. The receptionist should not be a secretary, file clerk, typist, gofer, etc., during the time she's expected to be covering the phones. Unless you have a very, very quiet office where the phone never rings, the receptionist should have a minimal number of other responsibilities that infringe on her phone duties. She should clearly understand that her number one priority is answering the phone and dealing with the callers in a professional manner.

Learn how to use your phone system. I know this sounds ridiculously simplistic, but first-hand observation proves that a majority of employees are clueless about how to operate the phone system in their own office. Basic skills, like transferring callers, setting up multi-party calls and using the "bells and whistles" today's sophisticated systems offer, are often lacking.

What's the answer? At least once a year, have a representative from your phone system (the people you either lease or purchased from) come in and do a presentation. There'll be will be little, if any,

cost. Make everyone attend, from the company president on down. Have the presenters leave a half dozen instruction books behind that explain the operation of your specific system, and always keep them handy for your people. Don't be surprised if you discover some pretty nifty phone capabilities that you never knew about.

Employee turnover and technophobia (especially among older workers) are the causes. And, not surprisingly, those most lacking in skills are usually management, at the very top.

There are even service companies that will "test" your system for you and deliver detailed reports for a nominal fee.

I know many will argue that a person who just answers the phone is a luxury they can't afford. My response is that it's a luxury you can't NOT afford. Cut somewhere else to make it work.

Also, the telephone companies, themselves, such as Verizon, offer seminars on "Telephone Etiquette," designed not only for support personnel, but for the company big shots too. Not to pick on them unfairly, but top management are probably the worst offenders, both in terms of poor system operation and with respect to proper telephone etiquette. Make sure they attend and pay attention.

Finally, here's a telephone tip I use all the time: When a receptionist or secretary says "I'll see if he's in. Can I tell him who's calling?" just respond, "Does that determine whether or not he's in?" Usually they get so flustered you get put right through. Try it, it works!

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