

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. Still, if there is one voice talking to another voice—sometimes augmented with a face—for the sake of this lesson, we are going to consider it a form of telephonic communication.

For the most part, unless there is a camera involved, we have no visual cues to help us better assess who’s on the other side of the line. We can’t see if they’re smiling, frowning, gesturing, multitasking, or playing a videogame. This can actually be a help, as we are forced to focus even harder on the specific words that they are saying and the tone in their voice, to form a more precise account of the problem. Sometimes the visuals can be an irrelevant distraction if we are instead taking account of their dress, hairstyle, or misdirecting 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, and place the power of telephonic systems to our advantage.

Telephonic Communication Tactics

Since we typically have no visual cues when speaking on the phone, it is essential we use tone of our voice and careful word selection to connect with our customers. We should use a calm friendly voice to convey warmth and concern—looking 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 at a normal volume, clearly, with short words and sentences so we don't overwhelm a customer, especially one who may already be frustrated and anxious. A good tip is to set our volume, rate of speech, and level of vocabulary to match our customer's. 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 some 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.

One of the most frustrating aspects of telephonic service for the customer is working their way through the initial automatic menu options when the call is first answered, along with voice mails and call transfers. The customer may be overwhelmed and frequently upset just by the process of getting connected with *you*. An apology right up front for that 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 customers, they may find this step 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 customers after finding the proper connection, be sure to thank them for waiting, and apologize if necessary for any excessive delay. Take time to introduce the customer to whomever is receiving the call transfer, confirm that the worker has been informed of the issue, and assure the customer that a resolution is about to happen.

Most all of us have been in the frustrating position of working through a company's phone system, placed on long holds, repeated our issue over and over again with each transfer, been disconnected during a transfer—only to have to begin it over again. It isn't hard for us to put ourselves into our customer's place as they deal with similar frustrations. By our efforts at empathy and 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 their problem has been explained.
- 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.