

Focus: Customer Service

“Stop Calling Our Company!” Is That The Message We’re Sending?

By David Knox

Phone numbers are on cards, signs, websites, postcards, flyers and everything else to get the prospects to call. But what happens when we answer? It’s time to develop proper telephone skills as a competitive advantage to gain business and provide superior customer service.

The days are gone when a happy, smiling, human cheerfully answered the telephone within two rings and offered assistance. Telephone skills in the real estate business have been replaced by an experience akin to harassment. We’ve hit bottom.

“Stop calling our company!” That’s the message we seem to be sending.

It’s too bad that customers ultimately have to phone a real estate company. Up to that point they’ve been effortlessly

getting information via the web or printed materials. Now they’re ready to connect with an agent but face the daunting challenge of getting a real person to answer the telephone and respond to their needs. Good luck.

FIRST IMPRESSION

Your declarations of market share and promises of customer service could all be negated in an instant on the first call to your company. How many rings until it’s answered? How pleasing is the first voice? How long did they wait on hold? How is the caller’s request handled?

Whoever answers your telephone needs to be prompt and friendly, then provide options to make the caller happy. If you have to put them on hold, ask permission first then check back frequently to gauge the caller’s wishes.

Remember, you have only a few seconds to establish a good first impression. Be cheerful and upbeat as you answer. Smile and visualize the caller. Be a person first, then a salesperson. Without a visual connection, you must rely on your verbal skills. Pay attention to matching the caller’s pace, speech patterns and energy.

Make the caller feel welcome and glad they called. “Hello, my name is ..., thank you so much for calling. How may I help you?”

There is an ongoing debate whether to ask for their name right away or after you have some rapport. Do what feels right on each call, but ultimately secure their name and information. Early on you might say, “My name is ..., to whom

am I speaking?”

Because this may be a potential listing call as well, you want to demonstrate the skills you will use when handling calls on their home.

GAIN CONTROL

In order to learn more about the prospect, you need some level of control. Whoever is asking the questions is in control. Initially the caller may ask questions about a specific property. As you feed them information, alternate asking questions. That will help slow them down a bit and give yourself time to establish rapport and determine their situation.

This is a gentle dance so be sensitive. Here are some sample questions:

- ◆ “Are you calling on the sign, ad or website?” (If they didn’t already tell you.)
- ◆ “What attracted you to this home?”
- ◆ “How’s your househunting going?”
- ◆ “How many properties have you called on?”

DETERMINE NEEDS

Your key goal is to determine whether the caller is a serious prospect. So, as you provide answers to their questions, ask about their situation. After telling them the price, ask what range they’re looking in. When you provide the location, ask what other areas they’re considering. You are not really trying to sell this home to them. If your answers meet their needs, they’ll ask you to show it to them. In all likelihood, the home that triggered the phone call will not fit their needs. If



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they’ve already discovered the asking price via the web or an ad, they’re hoping this home meets all their needs at this price. It probably won’t and they will most likely buy up in price. If they drove by the home without knowing the price, they will hope that this wonderful home will be right in their price range. It probably won’t be and they’ll have to buy down in price.

In the case where the home is already sold, say to them: “The home on which you called is sold but we have others in that general area and price range. Would you like to hear about them?” They’ll surely say yes, then you can follow up

with; “To narrow them down a bit, may I ask you a few questions?”

Here is a list of questions in their relative order of importance:

- ◆ How soon do you need to be settled?
- ◆ How long have you been looking?
- ◆ What areas are you considering?
- ◆ What is your present housing situation?
- ◆ In what price range are you comfortable?
- ◆ What are your housing requirements?
- ◆ Will you need to sell your current home before you buy?

You are questioning not only to learn their housing requirements, but to seek areas of discontent in their house hunting process in order to secure them as a client. Here are some reasons why a prospect might want to work with you instead of looking for homes on their own:

- ◆ Hassles of searching.
- ◆ Tired of looking at ads and websites.
- ◆ Too many salespeople calling back.
- ◆ Not enough salespeople calling back.
- ◆ Need more information to do effective house hunting.

Seven Ways To Annoy A Caller Right Away

The automated attendant

Some accountants have figured the per/call cost savings of not having a real person answer a phone and concluded that a mechanical system is an economical option. Unfortunately they don’t account for the revenue losses and customer anger these systems create. I consider this device to be a barrier between us and our customers. We’ve all grown to hate them, yet how many of you use them? No company should be allowed to call itself full service unless a real person answers the phone.

The best way to improve your automated attendant systems is to carefully place them on a solid surface, simultaneously press the pound and star keys, then beat the device to death with a ball peen hammer.

The long, long, long greeting

I suppose a long greeting from a real person is preferable to an automated voicemail system answering. But some greetings prattle on with unnecessary verbiage; “Thank you for calling *Too Many Words In the Name Realty Corporation*, a division of *Conglomerated Merger Systems*, this is Ashley at your service, I hope you’re having a wonderful day, how may I help you today?”

Voicemail introductions are just as painful. They ramble on and on providing unnecessary information, daily schedules, lists of others to contact, wishes for a nice day and all the things we should do after leaving our message. Just get to the point and give me the tone!

Options denied!

When a caller requests asks; “Is David there?” all too often the receptionist puts the caller right into voicemail. The proper response is either:

- A) Yes he is and I’ll connect you now.
- B) No he isn’t right now but I can page him for you, take a message or put you into his voicemail. What would you prefer?
- C) He is on a line right now. May I take a message or put you into his voicemail?

Change the attitude of your receptionist from wanting to “get rid of the call” to wanting to assist the caller and secure the business.

The long hold

Andy Rooney once asked; “If I die while I’m on hold, will that little light go off on the other end?” Whoever answers the phone is responsible for monitoring it until the party answers. If after 15 seconds nothing has happened, pick up and offer options. “She is still on her call. Would you like to continue to hold?”

Not having “0” go to the operator

The universal voicemail life preserver must be the “0” key. Not #0, *2 or some other weird key combo. Callers need to know that if they get desperate at any point in the voicemail process, they can always escape to a real person.

May I just leave a message? Nope, not yet.

How many times have you taken a breath to begin your message only to be faced with another series of advisories from a slow talking female voice? You’ll hear “At the end of your message press this, then press that to get a series of more options. To review your message do this...” Shut up and let me leave a message!

This third message should be turned off in your system menu. Get rid of it! We all know what to do.

Will he know the purpose of your call?

He might if you’d get out of the way and put my call through! Unless you pride yourself on being an egomaniac, stop with the ancient practice of having someone ask inane things like; “Will he know who’s calling?” or “Will she know what it’s regarding?” Sure, you might take a few annoying calls you could’ve screened, but then you will have avoided annoying the hundreds of people you wanted to have call.

FOCUS

Customer Service

MISSED OPPORTUNITIES

As you discover an area of discontent, say; “It sounds like you’re frustrated by not easily being able to find properties that suit you. Would you like some help?”

PRESENT BENEFITS

Before asking them to become customers, you must present benefits that satisfy their needs for help. Here are some advantages that you can offer a prospect:

- ◆ Save time.
- ◆ Quick access to new listings as they come on the market.
- ◆ Only one sales person to deal with.
- ◆ Convenience.
- ◆ No additional cost.

“Mrs. Prospect, one of the ways to relieve your frustration is to have a competent real estate agent take on the task of finding you a home. Once I know your needs I will search the market for homes currently available plus those that come on in the next few minutes. Our fees are paid by the seller so there’s no additional

cost to you. When would you like to get together?”

GET THEIR NAME AND INFORMATION

A way to at least get their name and information is to offer to help with their househunting. Offer to send information, tantalize them with information on a new listing or send them financing information. It may be easier to ask for their number or email first, then their name. “Mr. Prospect, I remember hearing of a brand new listing south of Summit Avenue. I’m going to check it out to see if it would work for you. How may I reach you?”

Here are some other questions:

- ◆ I get information on new listings every morning. Would you like know about the ones that fit you?
- ◆ If I find a home like the one you described, would you like to know about it?
- ◆ Would you like me to (send, email) you some properties that fit that description?

GET THE APPOINTMENT

It goes without saying that if you determine that a caller is a good prospect for buying or selling, then you want to set up a face-to-face meeting. It may be setting an appointment to see a specific property—either the one they called on, if that seems to suit their needs and price range, or one or more that you will select for them from the MLS.

If your schedule allows, don’t hesitate to push for an immediate showing. If either you or they are not available immediately, get them to commit to a specific time for the showing. If at all possible, have them come to your office first—it’s more professional, safer, and gives you better control of the process.

And remember, every phone call is valuable—even a wrong number—provided you turn it into an opportunity to get a little closer to a potential buyer, seller or referral prospect. ■

– David Knox