

# Communication Training: Phone Talk

## Phone Talk

When a client calls your company, then expect two things from you:

- Be nice; and
- Do good.

Being nice means that you are going to be courteous, respectful, and you're going to listen. Doing good means that you will help the caller in whatever way you can. Whoever in your company picks up the phone, they become the company. It doesn't matter if they are the owner or the field inspector. Whoever picks up the phone, they become the company. During that phone call, they have the opportunity to create for the caller a positive experience with your company.

What memorable experience do you convey when you pick up the phone?

- "That the inspector who knows a lot about homes."
- "That inspector is very friendly."
- "That inspector will go out of his way to help me."
- "That inspector cared about my situation."
- "That inspector remembered my birthday."
- "That inspector answered his own phone."

When you are talking with a client on the phone, listen. Listen. Listen. Focus entirely on your client and what they are saying. Listen carefully to not only what they are saying but also how they are saying it. Tune into their tone of voice.

The first words out of your client's mouth usually tell you the reason for the call. It's the most important thing your client wants to tell you, and you shouldn't miss it. Never ask the other person to repeat their opening statement. Listen and pay attention, particularly in the very beginning.

Have a pen and paper handy. Or if your handy, you can take notes on your computer software that handles phone calls, communications, and scheduling. If your client gives their name, write it down. If the client is emotional in any way, particularly angry or upset, jot that down in your notes. You don't have to write everything down like a transcript of the conversation, just the highlights or the most important points.

Do not interrupt. If your client is calling because you inspected the house last month and now the roof is leaking into the bedroom ceiling, do not interrupt. If you interrupt your client in this situation, they will even more upset, thinking that you do not have the time or desire to care about the situation.

Answer on the first ring. Do not allow the phone to ring more than 4 times. Most people expect a business phone to be answered quickly. Before you pick up the phone, smile. Your smile will be heard over the phone. Identify yourself by stating your business name, your first name, and your opening statement. Or it could be a question such as, "How may I help you?" Speak with a smile and in a friendly tone of voice. Be ready and eager to help and please. Establish a rapport by finding common ground. And use their name if you have it. "Thank you for calling Joe's Inspections. This is Mary. How may I help you today?"

Reiterate what the other person has said or has requested before proceeding. Make sure you understand what the other person wants. Summarize, “Okay. Let’s see if I understand. Inspector Joe performed an inspection last month. Now the roof is leaking. Water is dripping into the ceiling. You’re calling to see what should be done and how Inspector Joe can help. Is that correct?”

If you need to look something up or retrieve some information that requires you to be off the phone or silent for a few moments, then inform the other person on the line what you are doing. Tell them what you’re doing. Don’t let there be a lot of silence on the phone. Tell them, “Alright. I’m writing down the information you provided.” “I’m looking up the report documents...” or “I’ll have to put you on hold while I get the inspector. It’ll only be a few moments.”

If you are going to put someone on hold, explain why and provide an estimated time. It’s common courtesy. “I’ll have to put you on hold so I can find that inspection report. It’ll take about a minute. Will you hold?” If you find that it’s taking longer than a minute, get back on the phone line and tell the other person that it’ll be longer and provide an update. When you finally get the information and return to the call, thank the other person for waiting. You should not expect anyone to wait more than 5 minutes. If the wait time is 5 minutes or longer, tell the other person that you will call them before the end of the day. Refrain from using phrases such as “I’ll call you back as soon as possible” or “... as soon as I can.”

When you talk on the phone with someone, you need to use your words more carefully than when you talk with someone face-to-face. The phone eliminates all of that important nonverbal communication. Effective phone talk is short and to the point. And sounds such as “hmm” and “I see” that indicate you’re listening are very important.

## **Tone**

Your tone of voice over the phone is critical. It conveys your emotions. It provides evidence of your feelings. Be aware of your tone of voice at all times. Before you pick up the phone, forget the last phone call or conversation you just ended, and smile. Smile. Then pick up the phone. Your smile will be heard over the phone. Soften or increase your tone of voice depending upon the situation. Soften it particularly if the caller is experiencing a problem.

## **Saying No**

Good customer service does not mean always having to say, “Yes.” Sometimes the best thing you can do for yourself and your client is to say, “No.” The key to providing good customer service includes knowing what you can do and not promising anything else.

Before you say that you can’t do something for a client, such as walk upon a very steep, slate roof during a rainstorm, work with your client to try to find an alternative. Maybe it’s possible to inspect the slate roof from several vantage points, or maybe with the assistance from a professional slate roofer. While you might not be able to do exactly what the client requests, you might be able to do something just as good.

Remember, you don’t have to accept work from everyone who wants to retain you. If a client starts off difficult or unreasonable, it usually gets worse, not better. While it may be hard to walk away from an inspection fee, it’s sometimes cheaper in the long run.

Furthermore, an added bonus to refusing to allow these consumers to become clients is that they become your competitors' clients. Pity those competitors.

### **Ending the Phone Call**

Your client will judge your company based upon their interactions with you on the phone. Ending the phone call effectively will produce a positive impact. Ending the phone call effectively starts with summarizing the call. Repeat what your client has requested. This will assure the client that you will handle the request correctly. “Mary, I have you schedule for a home inspection on Tuesday May 5<sup>th</sup>. You’d like us to bring a radon test just in case you later decide to hire us to perform a radon test. You will be there at the home inspection. And I will gain access to the property through your agent, whom I will call immediately after our phone conversation. Is that right?” Wait for your client’s acknowledgement. This recap will help reduce errors in scheduling and increase client satisfaction.

Before ending the phone conversation, ask your client if there is anything else that your company can do. Give your name again. “My name is Mary. If there’s anything else we can do for you, or if your schedule changes, feel free to call me. Until then, Inspector Joe will see you on Tuesday.”

Thank the other person for calling. “Thank you for calling Inspector Joe’s. Have a great day.”

When someone calls, it is no time to be shy. If you provide a good home inspection service, you have an ethical duty to allow as many of your fellow citizens as possible to enjoy the benefits of your good work. Convert!

## Voice Mail

Try to answer the phone on the first ring. Most callers care less about the number of rings and more that the phone is eventually answered by someone who can help them. Make sure you understand your voice mail and answering system. Many voice mail systems are designed to take the call after 2 and ½ rings. So if you want to talk with a caller, you have to pick up the phone before the 3<sup>rd</sup> ring. Having a roll over system is good for when you want the call to roll over to another line if the call is not answered by the third ring. The objective is to ensure that the phone calls are answered.

In an article titled, "At the tone, please hang up and call my competitor," Nick Gromicko writes the following:

Make sure someone who can convert or sell is actually answering your business phone. If your potential clients are reaching voicemail, an answering service, or an untrained employee or spouse... you are probably not converting many of them into clients. Real estate agreements limit the amount of time a buyer has to schedule an inspection. Buyers don't have time to leave a message. Try having your calls forwarded to your cell phone and answer them yourself.

Many inspectors refuse to allow their cell phone to interrupt them on an inspection. I think this is a mistake. The client you are performing the inspection for is already sold. His money is in the bank. The client calling you, trying to schedule, is new money. Get that new money.

When I first went into the inspection business, I had two cell phones. I had one for new business. All my ads, flyers, brochures, etc., contained this phone number. If it rang, it was most likely new business. I kept this phone with me on my inspections and always answered it. I had another phone for everything else. On my home inspection report, I would include this second phone number (not my new business number). That way, if my client had a question, they would call my second number, leaving my first number free for new business.

Upon meeting a new client for the first time (on an inspection), I would ask, "If my cell phone rings during the inspection, would you mind if I answered it?" Nearly all my clients gave me permission to answer my cell phone during the inspection. Because I only carried my new business cell phone with me on the inspection, calls that interrupted an inspection were new business.

An added benefit: During a home inspection, your client is still sizing you up, so to speak. Your client is wondering if they hired the right inspector. I'm sure many of my clients thought, "Gee, this Nick guy looks too fat to fit in the crawlspace." Having your cell phone ring during an inspection shows your client that others seek your services and that you are in demand. If someone calls you who is not new business, just explain that you are in the middle of an inspection and will call them back. If your wife calls you to bring home a gallon of milk, just tell her in front of your client, "I'd love to do that inspection for you; let me call you back." But, of course, if it is new business... book it!