

The Telephone – A Help or A Hassle

Putting a 19th Century Invention to Good Use in the 21st

Margaret W. Purvine



Ms. Purvine is a Principal with Next Step Solutions, Inc. Her business career spans 25 years and includes experience in management, sales, IT and several aspects of customer support. She can be reached directly by phone at 425.918.1910, by email at margaret@nextstepsolutions.com, and by “snailmail” at 9792 Edmonds Way, #424, Edmonds, WA 98020.

We all know about phones. Or so we think. We’ve certainly been using them forever. They’ve been around since the late 19th century. In fact, the famous first phone call (“Mr. Watson, come here, I want you.”) happened on March 10, 1876. Alexander Graham Bell made the call, then won the patent (beating fellow inventor Elisha Gray to the patent office by a few hours and then winning the lawsuit Gray filed against him), and founded an industry. We’ve been using phones avidly ever since.

So why fuss now over phones? They ring, constantly it seems, and you groan at the interruption and answer. Or you “dial” a number (a quaint, old-fashioned, and completely out of date expression) and someone else groans and answers. So, is it just fuss and bother? I hope not! Our goal in using a phone should be to communicate. To reach out and talk to people. In the context of business, however, the communication is more focused, directed to customers, vendors, suppliers, prospects – not just Aunt Suzy, as important as she may be. The phone becomes a tool to facilitate doing business and, as such, it is even more critical that the resulting communication be effective. How do we do that? I believe we stand the best chance of achieving excellent business communication by focusing on our customers. Think first about your best clients trying to call and make it as simple and painless as possible for them to do business with your company.

Components of Effective Phone Communications

There are lots of ways to make your phone work better for you and your business. I see them falling under three major headings: Attitude; Process; Tools.

Let me start with attitude. How do you react when the phone rings? Yes, you are busy and the interruption of a noisy ring may have destroyed deep concentration or creative flow. I wasn’t kidding when I mentioned groaning above. I have seen and heard this many times and in many offices. But what if that caller is a potential client with a big project? If you are annoyed when you pick up the phone, believe me, that caller will sense it. Let’s face it. Most of us are poor actors and, regardless of the words we choose, our voices will communicate our honest feelings. I took a telemarketing class many years ago and one of the first lessons was the effect of a smile on the voice. There is a reason they call telemarketing “smiling and dialing”. It works better that way.

Next, strive to be reachable and responsive. For small businesses in particular, this begins with effective handling of phone calls and callbacks. In our very mobile society, the central office with a full time receptionist is far less common than it used to be. We are all on the move, doing business wherever we are at the moment. So the phone has become even more critical and, consequently, more fraught with risk if mishandled. Impressions of you and your company may very well be formed when that first call is answered. So don’t blow it!

Now that you have established a positive attitude, think through your telephone procedures. How do you want to answer your phone? What do you want to say? What do you want your employees to say? How should calls be routed? What do you want to say when the person the caller wants is not available? How do you want to handle messages? How do you want people to reach you if you are out? Once you have thought about these issues and come up with answers that work for you and your business, you’ve got your procedures. Take the time to document them and then use them consistently. You will find out pretty quickly if something doesn’t work in actual practice and you can modify your procedures accordingly.

Ultimately, you want your phone call handling to be responsive, consistent, and always professional. You can achieve this regardless of the size of your business. If you have an office with a number of employees, training will be the key to consistent and effective telephone communications. You can create just as professional an appearance even if you are a

one-person firm operating out of a spare bedroom. How? By starting with a professional mind set and setting up your phone system and call handling procedures accordingly.

Finally, there is the tool itself – your phone. Nowadays, that includes phone, phone lines, voicemail or answering machine, perhaps even a full blown phone system. Get to this part last. Set your attitude, determine the requirements of your business and think through your procedures first. Then, let these drive your tool or system selection decisions. If you are not sure how to proceed, get some help, preferably from an experienced business consultant, not just a phone system salesperson. Telephone systems for business are critical enough to justify careful thought and planning!

Telephone 101 – Rules for Using Your Phone to Best Advantage

- If you are just starting out and working out of home, add a separate phone line, just for business. It's not that expensive and will make it simpler to establish and maintain a proper business image.
- If you are a heavy fax user, add a dedicated fax line. It will save you in the long run.
- If your call volume is large, add enough voice lines to handle the load and make sure that your voicemail can, too. Here is one example – my company. We analyzed our phone needs very carefully up front. We do a large proportion of our work over the phone, so even when just starting out with a 2-person firm, we installed 3 voice lines and a 4th line dedicated to the fax. The voice lines were defined as a "hunt group", so our clients only have to know a single number. Calls roll from line to line until one is available. If we can't pick up, the voicemail can handle more than one call concurrently.
- Especially for the home office, NEVER allow a child to answer your business line. If you can't answer, let it go to an answering machine or voicemail. Instruct your children never to answer your business line, too. I am totally put off when I call a business and get a child. It creates a terrible first impression and may be my last call to a business. Besides being unprofessional, the caller can't leave an effective message, especially with a very young child.
- Return calls promptly. Don't leave callers hanging! If it is going to take more time to get the information requested, at least call the party back and assure them you are working on it.
- Avoid interrupting a call to take another call. It is very rude. Set up your phone system to allow a second call to go to your voicemail. And disable "call waiting". That function is fine for home use, but it doesn't work for a business that handles any real volume of calls. (Speaking of rudeness, phone etiquette is a big topic, one I will deal with more fully in another article.)
- Smile before you answer the phone. Remember, if you are annoyed when you pick up the phone, the caller will be able to tell.
- Have a standard way to answer your phone and SPEAK CLEARLY. You want a client or prospect to know who they are calling, right? Don't mumble or go too quickly through your company name or your own name. And don't just say "hello". You want your caller to know they have reached a real business, not a home number.
- Don't pass out too many phone numbers. Simplify. I have seen business cards that list office phone, cellular phone, car phone, pager, "access line", even home phone. This doesn't help people reach you. It confuses the issue. Which number do I call? If you don't answer, where do I leave the message? At all of your numbers? How can I be sure my message will reach you? I think you can see my point. Don't make your valuable clients chase you down. Make it simple for them. Have only one business number. If you are out, use "call forwarding" to send calls to your cellular phone.
- Speaking of "call forwarding", learn to use the features of your phone and the features your telephone company provides with your service. Take the time to RTFM (Read The F...ing Manual) and try out the many bells and whistles. You won't need all of them, but there are some gems there that will make your work easier. Practice every now and then to keep the knowledge fresh. That way you won't fumble in front of an important caller. If you have employees, train them, too. I can't overemphasize the importance of training, with phones or any other tool used to support your business.

Congratulations! You have just graduated from Telephone 101!