
When You Speak...



More than 75 percent of new contacts make their decision about whether or not to do further business with you during the initial phone call. Make that initial phone contact and all the succeeding ones, the very best possible. We use office phones, cell phones, conference calls, and speaker phones to get business completed. The person you talk with on the phone cannot see the size of your office, your office furnishings, or you. All their conclusions about you, your business, and your ability to deliver what you promise, are based on your voice and your words and how well they convey courtesy and respect. What kind of an impression do you leave when you speak on the telephone?

Your voice is your vehicle for communication. Record a phone call or tape-record yourself speaking and listen to your voice. You want to speak loudly and clearly enough for people to hear you easily. If people ask you to repeat things you say, you may not be speaking loudly enough. Make certain that your voice is pleasant and causes people to want to listen. Practice your speaking to develop variety in pace, modulation, and pitch. The way you speak impacts the way you are perceived. Is your voice pitch high (shrill) or very low (deep)? Listen to your voice with an unbiased friend who will help you evaluate the quality and listening appeal of your voice. The most comfortable listening range falls within the medium range. High-pitched voices are more difficult to understand and are often perceived as unprofessional. Speech, voice, or drama coaches can help you improve your voice. You'll hear results right away, and they'll make a positive impact on your professionalism. Your voice and words are essential to making a positive impression and portraying your professionalism. Using proper telephone manners will help you build friends and clients, develop and keep a good reputation, and lead to success.

Telephone Etiquette

Whenever you speak on the telephone, speak clearly and directly into the mouthpiece. Identify yourself immediately to the other person. Speak slowly and with courtesy. Focus yourself on the purpose of the call and the person you are speaking with; don't try to do things like open mail or talk with someone in the room with you in the course of your telephone conversation. Don't eat or drink while you are on the phone. You may not be aware of how well the person at the other end of the line can hear you chewing and swallowing; the impression you leave will not be a good one. Smile as you speak. You'll be surprised how well a smile can be heard in your voice.

Making Phone Calls

- Be prepared before you dial. If this is an information gathering call, have a script handy so that you will remember to cover all the information.
- Know the reason for your call and be ready to discuss it.
- Place your call during normal business hours. Your call will not be well received if you wait until five minutes before closing.
- Be ready to leave a message with an assistant or receptionist, if the person you wish to talk with is unavailable.
- Make your own calls. Asking your assistant to get a client on the phone implies to the client that your time is more valuable than theirs.
- Answer phone messages left for you within forty-eight hours, whenever possible. If you are away for more than a day, it is courteous to your callers to so indicate in your message unless someone is taking your calls for you.

Answering Phone Calls

If you are the administrative assistant or receptionist who handles incoming calls for your company, you are the voice of the company. You are the first contact a person has with your business whether you are a one-person office or a large corporation. This is true for anyone who answers incoming calls, regardless of their position. You can make a good impression when speaking on the phone when you

- Answer by the third or fourth ring.
- Identify yourself immediately.
- Speak slowly, clearly, and with courtesy.
- Speak with a smile in your voice.
- Use the caller's name.
- Have pen and paper handy to make notes or take a message.
- Minimize background noise.
- End the call with a positive statement and an acknowledgment of the caller.

Please Hold

There will be times when you will need to put callers on hold. Only put callers on hold for a few seconds. If the call is being transferred, make sure the other party picks up the phone in a reasonable amount of time. If they do not, pick up the call again, acknowledge the caller by name, and ask if they would like to continue to hold or if they would rather leave a message.

If you must leave the line to answer a call-waiting call, make sure you leave the first caller on hold for only a few seconds, and acknowledge the caller by name when you return.

Remember that call-waiting is a convenience for you, not your caller. When you ask the first caller to wait while you answer a second call, you imply that he is less important than the new caller. Make your connection with the second caller brief; return their call promptly when you finish with the first caller.

If you need to transfer a call, explain the reason for the transfer to the caller. Monitor the lines to be certain the transfer was completed successfully.

Sometimes, you may be required to answer someone else's phone while they are away from their desk or to answer the phone for others in your office. This can be challenging when you must answer questions or provide information that you do not have. The best response is to take a message. Be sure that there are phone message pads and pen where you will answer the phone. Ask for the caller's name, phone number (repeat it for accuracy), reason for the call, and best time to return the call. Add your name or initials and the date and time of the call to the message.

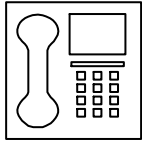
A courteous response to the caller is that the person they wish to reach is unavailable. You may add that they are with a client, in a meeting, or have stepped away from their desk for a moment. Be aware that you want to leave a professional image with the caller. It is not important for the caller to know exactly where the person is, what they are doing at the moment, or even where you think they might be. In fact, to offer this level of information may betray confidentiality and imply that you are not careful about preserving confidentiality for your colleagues or your clients.

Handling Difficult Callers.

Sometimes callers are rude and unreasonable. You may not know why they are rude or unhappy, but you can influence the outcome of the call and perhaps regain the caller's goodwill. Begin by remaining calm and speaking in even tones. Ask the caller to identify himself and ask the reason for the call. Speaking softly will encourage the caller to calm down and not shout. If the caller uses obscenities, ask them to use other language. Explain that you can't help them if they won't help you. When speaking with the caller, address him as Mr. Jones and sir (use ma'am with a woman caller).

Angry people are not ready to listen. They must get their anger out before they will be able to listen to you. Encourage them to explain the problem or why they are unhappy. Restate the problem to them, and offer to transfer them to the appropriate department or suggest someone with whom they should speak. Offer to see if that person is available and, if not, offer to take a message. You may be able to diffuse some of the caller's anger just by listening attentively. This will make your colleague's job easier when he has to talk with this caller and will leave the caller with a more positive impression of your company.

Voice Messaging Systems



Voice messaging systems were developed to provide more efficient customer service and to improve the productivity of office staff. Unfortunately, many customers wait a long time through layers and layers of messages making numerical choices based on questions asked to them.

They often never get to a real person and either are asked to leave a message or have to hang up and start the process over again.

Voice messaging systems serve a purpose but they can be frustrating to callers. Frequently callers have difficulty knowing which selections to make to have their question answered. They are left feeling frustrated; the company has lost their personal touch and perhaps a customer. We've probably all had experiences with a voice messaging system. Maybe you've come across a message like the following.

Hello, you have reached ACE Company. To order a product—press 1, to ask about a charge on your bill—press 2, to review your bill—press 4, to speak to the operator—press 0. Hello, you have reached the automated system for ACE. If you wish to speak to someone about a warranty—press 1, if you wish to speak to a customer service representative—press 3, if you wish to speak to the operator—press 4. Hello, you have reached the automated system for ACE. To report a lost or stolen card—press 1, to increase your credit limit—press 2, to speak to an operator—press 3.pauseHello, all our operators are busy helping other customers. Your call is important to us so please stay on the line music we estimate the next available service representative will be with you in five minutes.

When someone finally answers, you may have reached a department in error and have to start the system over again, or the person you've reached may not know how to transfer you to the correct department and you may get cut off (and have to start over again).

Some voice messaging systems allow callers to bypass the message by pressing a specified telephone button such as the pound (#) key. If your message system has a long message and you have frequent callers, tell them how to bypass the remainder of the message early in the message.

Call your own company or business and put yourself in the shoes of your client or customer. I know a company president who was traveling on business. He phoned the company to speak with one of his sales managers but couldn't get through. In desperation, he called the customer service line and got locked into the voice message loop. He was shocked by how inefficient and frustrating the system was. Does your company answering machine message or voice message system leave a positive impression? You may wish to periodically check your own message system to be sure.

Your Telephone Greeting

When leaving a telephone greeting on your answering machine or voice mail system that will be heard by your callers speak slowly and state your name, company, and/or phone number. Keep the message brief; some systems will only allow thirty to sixty seconds for your greeting. Ask the caller for specific information, for example, Please leave your name and phone number.

If you have unlimited time for your greeting, you can make the message interesting and fun. You can play music in the background, leave a favorite quote, or make a comment about business or life. Whatever you choose, consider its impact on the positive impression you want your message to make on your clients.

If the caller can bypass the message, give instructions on how to do so in the message. If you can be reached by pager or other means, include instructions to that effect also.

Leaving a Message

When leaving a message for someone you have called speak slowly and clearly. Leave your name, phone number, and a brief message. Say your phone number slowly; many people repeat the number so quickly that the recipient can't write it down or hear the numbers. If you say the number too fast, you may not get the return phone call. Give your phone number twice when leaving a message, once at the beginning of the message and again at the end. Mention the best time to return your call.

If you don't really need a return call, it is considerate to leave enough information about why you are calling to enable the person you've called to take care of the matter. For instance, if you're calling to confirm your lunch appointment, remind the individual of the date, time, and place. Let them know they don't need to call you back unless there is a problem or they need to reschedule. It is always proper etiquette to leave your phone number even if you know they have it; your thoughtfulness will save them the time and effort of looking up your number.

At the end of the message leave your name and phone number again, as a courtesy to the recipient so they don't have to rewind the tape if they didn't hear your name or phone number clearly the first time.

Cell Phone Etiquette

Is the person with whom you are eating lunch, having a meeting, attending a conference, church, concert, or other event less important than someone who might call you on your cell phone? When you answer your cell phone without considering those around you, you send them the message that they aren't as important. Having a cell phone is not a status symbol; in fact it may be a rudeness badge. Cell phones are a modern technology convenience to allow us to keep on top of every business deal and to be quickly accessible to anyone who might have a question or need assistance. But there is a price to pay for that instant availability.

When your cell phone is on you are at the beck and call of everyone who has your number. You feel responsible to answer calls and take action, which distracts you from current projects. You risk being interrupted in meetings, at mealtime, and in the car. Cell phone calls can diminish your creative thinking time. You may be too distracted to drive safely when talking and driving.

Cell phones are most effective when used to call for help, to collect messages, and to make urgent calls while away from the office. If you are driving alone in slow traffic, a call may make efficient use of your time.

Cell phone use is inconsiderate of those around you when you use it in enclosed public places such as restaurants, elevators, subways, airplanes, buses, and trains. Your call may be annoying to others in churches, synagogues, concerts, theaters, waiting rooms, courtrooms (you could be fined or asked to leave), or other quiet public places.

And remember, when you use your cell phone, make sure you don't say anything you wouldn't want to be repeated or stated on a billboard.

I was disturbed by a man who paced the dentist's waiting room and conducted a business call while I sat within earshot of every word. I was annoyed, as was the office staff. Such behavior is rude and inconsiderate. I imagine the person on the other end of the phone would not have been pleased if they'd realized their call was so public. It would have been better for the man to step outside or sit in his car for the time it took to transact the call.

Should I turn off my cell phone at the dining table?

Yes. If you must accept a call, alert your host or guests when you sit down. When the phone rings, excuse yourself from the table and keep your conversation private and brief. Whenever you are dining in a restaurant, even if dining alone, leave the room if you must talk on the cell phone to avoid disturbing other diners.

At a luncheon program, the woman across the table took out her cell phone, dialed, and then covering her mouth to muffle her voice, proceeded to conduct quiet business. Her actions were rude to the luncheon speaker (who was in the midst of his speech), to those at her table and, in fact, to all in seeing and hearing distance. If you need to be working or checking important messages, leave the table and move to a private place where you won't disturb others. Do not assume that just because you turn your back to the crowd or cover your mouth while you talk on the phone that you are practicing acceptable etiquette. Talking on your cell phone, allowing the ring to be heard or a pager to beep, is rude and annoying to the others around you no matter where you are.

Doing business on the cell phone can be dangerous if you are driving. Cell phone use increases the risk of auto accidents by over 30 percent. When you receive a call on your cell phone while driving, pull over to the side of the road or on to a side street and conduct your business while the car is stopped. You will be better able to focus on the individual calling and the business under discussion. Your caller will appreciate the implication that his call is important to you. Otherwise, you are creating a dangerous situation for other drivers and their passengers. Always ask yourself, Do I need to make or take this call at this moment? Beware of jeopardizing the safety of others.

If you use a cell phone:

- Don't force others who happen to be wherever you are to listen to your cell phone calls.
- Don't call your cell phone friends from outside of their area code if you can avoid it, especially since they will be paying for the long-distance charges.
- Don't drive under the influence of an absorbing conversation.
- Don't ask to use a friend's cell phone.
- Don't call friends who reserve their cell phone only for emergencies.

Observe the rules of common sense and good etiquette when using cell phones. Any call is an intrusion on someone else's time and, in the use of cell phones, the recipient pays for the call. Call a cell phone only if the individual has instructed you to call or if you have determined that an immediate answer is imperative.

Teleconferencing

Teleconferencing by phone on a conference line is a practical way to conduct a meeting. All participants should follow the guidelines set by the chair. The chair calls the meeting and takes full control of the meeting to avoid digression. The chair should call the roll by having everyone introduce themselves with their self-introduction, including any specifics asked for by the leader. The rules for speaking need to be outlined and reiterated if someone does not follow them.

Voice-only communication forces attention to your voice inflection and word choice. The basic rules for teleconferencing are the same as those for any business communication: don't interrupt, keep on the subject, and avoid negative comment of others. Without body language, which is a major part of your communication, you must rely primarily on your words and voice to communicate your ideas. Enunciate clearly and smile often. You project positive inflections in your voice when you smile.

Everyone must call in on time, as prearranged. The leader must be specific about the time and the time zone so that everyone knows when the meeting is scheduled to begin. An agenda should be distributed before the call and reiterated at the beginning of the conference call itself.

The cost per participant will vary depending on the long-distance provider so beware if you are on the road and calling in for period of time. You may wish to use an 800 number if one is available for this purpose. Some organizations call each of the participants from the central meeting point and thus absorb the telephone costs for the participants.

When participants speak, they should preface their remarks by stating their name. Participants may be assigned speaking turns, or the session may be an open discussion. It is essential that there be no out of turn interruptions. If you wish to speak, wait for a pause to begin your contribution. Keep the discussion to the business or agenda of the meeting.

At the end of the conference the leader should summarize the discussion, close the conference, and thank the participants. A written outline should be e-mailed or faxed to participants within three days of the call. Teleconferencing can be very useful to gather people from many different locations together. The leader must maintain control of the discussion to keep it on the topic and moving forward.