

Your best marketing tool

By Jeannie Davis

Five simple techniques will help you maximize the marketing potential of your phone.



The most important way to improve your company's phone service is to train your staff to return calls promptly.

While the telephone is usually a company's first point of customer contact, the person answering it is frequently under-trained in the marketing value of phone etiquette and under-utilized as the first person who represents the company to prospective customers. Worse yet is an automated system that takes callers nowhere FAST—or the one-person operation with a cell phone-business line that usually goes straight to voice mail. If any of these scenarios sound familiar, read on and learn how very simple techniques can make your telephone your company's best marketing tool.

1. EXTEND A PLEASANT GREETING: Like the initial introduction in a face-to-face encounter, your telephone greeting helps present a memorable image, makes the customer feel welcome and builds a rapport that shows callers you want them to be on your client list. Set a company-wide standard for how calls are to be answered and include:

- Salutation, which simulates a handshake;
- The company or department name, which identifies your company;
- The name of the person answering the phone, which helps build rapport;
- An offer of assistance, which works as an image-builder.

A friendly, professional greeting might sound like this: "Good morning! ABC Landscapes, Joan speaking. How may I help you?" or "How may I assist you today?"

When we work repetitively, saying the same thing over and over, we can begin to sound monotonous, canned or impersonal. So it's a good idea to change your greeting periodically. And remember to put a smile in your voice.

2. RETURN PHONE CALLS: The most important step you can take to improve your phone customer service is to train your staff to return calls promptly. You've probably left a voice mail message recently for someone who didn't return your call or who didn't return it promptly. How many people did you tell? The average person will tell three to five people about not receiving a call back. As a result, someone earns a bad reputation. Don't let it be you or your company!

We owe it to our customers—and our own business success—to be responsive. Does your company have a clearly stated and circulated policy about returning calls? Is anyone checking to make sure this is done? If not, it can cost you customers.

Make sure calls are returned before the end of the business day whenever possible. **THIS SHOULD BE A TOP PRIORITY FOR YOUR COMPANY!** Returning phone

calls is one of the best ways to demonstrate professionalism and reliability before you land a new customer—and throughout the course of your business relationship. Train your staff to set aside time for returning calls, say a half-hour in the morning and a half-hour in the afternoon. Develop a system for returning calls that works and stick to it.

If you need to, hire an answering service or an off-site office service. Teach them how to handle your calls, what questions to ask and the answers to questions that prospective clients frequently ask you. Give callers a realistic timeframe for when they should expect a call back.

When you return calls, chances are you'll get voice mail. Great! Be prepared to leave a message that addresses the customer's need and minimizes phone tag. Speak clearly, and be sure to state your name, position, company and time you can be reached. State your phone number clearly and slowly. You might want to say it twice so the recipient doesn't have to replay the message if he or she doesn't get your number the first time. That's just 5 seconds of your time dedicated to "extra mile" customer service.

3. PROVIDE LIVE PEOPLE OPTIONS ON YOUR MENU: As consumers, we have developed a love/hate relationship with telephone menu options. Sadly, many

BOB-CAT®

By Jacobsen

Bob-Cat ZT125 Mower

This Cat Bags More Bucks

- Fuel-Efficient, 25 Horse Power Kohler Command V-T OHV Engine
- 42" or 48" Discharge Rear Deck with Standard Grass Collection System
- 7/10 Gauge Steel Deck
- Quick Deck Access Service Area



Bob-Cat Gear Drive Walk Behind Series

- Available with 32" to 54" Fixed Decks or 36" to 61" Floating Deck
- Powerful Kohler-Kawasaki Engines
- Five Forward and One Reverse Speed
- Peerless Five-Speed Gear box



**GET THE PERFORMANCE YOU NEED
TO STAY ON SCHEDULE!**

Proudly Distributed by

L.L. Johnson Distributing Company
Grounds Power Equipment Division
1-800-793-1270 or 303-320-1270

Call for a dealer near you
Visit the website www.bob-cat.com



2006 CLT Maintenance
Module Official Sponsor

Photo courtesy David Winger Landscape Photography



The most important way to improve customer service is to return phone calls.

businesses intentionally do not provide an option that lets us speak immediately to a live person.

IVR (Interactive Voice Response) systems can be an effective business management tool for businesses with a high call volume. Yet, the lack of personal interaction often impedes customer communication and discredits the organization. Within a typical small to mid-size business, however, every effort should be made to put your customers directly in touch with real people.

If you rely on an automated phone system, you may never know how many business opportunities are lost when callers become frustrated with your phone system. How many prospects and repeat customers do you really want to lose because you don't have a live person answer the phone or as the first option in your automated system?

Remember, the people who work for you know whom to select from the recorded company directory. But what about first-time callers? How do they pick from a menu that lists the estimating department, payables, receivables and the names of 15 people? They just want to know if you build water features. Since that's not on your menu, they move on to another company that makes them feel glad they called.

4. TAKE ADVANTAGE OF THE DOWN TIME—ON-HOLD TIME. Many businesses fail to recognize that when callers are on hold, they have a captive audience! If you play rock music for the chardonnay crowd, you might not convey the company image you want to present. On the other hand, if you use that down time to talk about your company's primary services, newest products, response time, attentiveness to detail—you've just bought yourself a 100 percent FREE commercial.

Callers also find themselves on down time when your office is closed. Don't let the phone ring more than four times before it is answered—try for one or two. Have a brief, but detailed recording that tells when you are open for business, how to deal with emergencies, etc. It is amazing how many companies that have a live person answer the phone all day fail to have a recording and message opportunity during non-business hours. Taking care of down time is customer-conscious and user-friendly.

5. HAVE GOOD CELL PHONE MANNERS: In a small business, your personal cell phone may be your lifeline. However, it also can be a customer-relations headache when it interrupts a business meeting. We all forget to turn off our phones at one time or another, but doing so frustrates everyone and is disrespectful to the speaker.

The same is true when meeting with customers. Most customers don't welcome your attention being drawn from them to the caller and waiting to transact business with you until your call is completed. Answering your phone in the presence of others—even speaking in a loud whisper or

a hushed tone—is distracting, rude and inconsiderate. Unless you're waiting for an important phone call, turn your phone off or to vibrate. If you are expecting an important, can't-miss call, let your customer know that at the outset of your meeting.

If your cell phone is your business line, consider some of the answering service suggestions above—including a remote office service, which can offer various options to improve your phone responsiveness. I recently heard of a green industry company whose off-site office service gives a caller an automatic call-back within 20 minutes if the business owner is unable to pick up a voice mail message. Another service sends callers to a remote office where their staff—whom you can train—will help your clients with basic information and questions. If you are in the field most of the day, this kind of service could free you up to work with fewer interruptions while maintaining good customer contact.

Like good service in person, good phone service is called, “going the extra mile.” Your customers will appreciate your

thoughtfulness. With good etiquette and phone policies that are followed company-wide, you and your staff can make the phone your company's best marketing tool.



—Jeannie Davis, owner of *Now Hear This, Inc.*, in Denver, is a speaker, trainer and the award-winning author of *Beyond*

Hello: A Practical Guide for Excellent Telephone Communication and Quality Customer Service.

She will be giving a seminar at ProGreen EXPO in January, and she can be reached at (303) 337-1991, at jeannie@phoneskills.com and at www.phoneskills.com.



COMPACT TRACK LOADERS

- JOHN DEERE ENGINES
- STABLE ON MUDDY TERRAIN & STEEP SLOPES
- EASY TO MAINTAIN
- RELIABLE
- LESS DOWNTIME
- HIGHLY PRODUCTIVE



Commerce City, CO (303) 287-7506 / 1-800-646-6636
Grand Junction, CO (970) 243-7090 / 1-800-746-6636
Durango, CO (970) 247-4460 / 1-800-946-6636
Mills (Casper), WY (307) 266-4474 / 1-800-846-6636



JOHN DEERE