

A Ring A Ling on Your Ding A Ling - Telephone Etiquette

By Beverley O'Neil, Ktunaxa Nation

Ring. Ring. Ring. Ring. Ring... several more rings later, someone finally answers in a less than enthusiastic voice, mumbling, "Can you hold?" Before you have a chance to reply, and you haven't even determined whether you have reached the right number, you are placed on hold (at least you hope it is hold) with only the sound of dead air buzzing in your ear. This is your first impression of the professionalism of the organization and person you are trying to contact. Do they employ "Ding-a-Lings" to answer the ring-a-ling?

Some of the fatal mistakes made by the people answering the telephone are:

- Not promptly answering the phone;
- Assuming the female caller is a Mrs.;
- Placing the caller on hold without waiting for a reply;
- Not informing the caller of the organization;
- Speaking too fast;
- Using hands free in the reception area or other room where the setting is not private;
- Not knowing how to use the telephone equipment - i.e. how to pick up a call, place a call on hold, or transfer a call;
- Saying "Bye-bye" instead of a professional "Good-bye" or "Thank you for calling";
- Mistaking the time of day - good afternoon when its morning and vice-versa;
- Promising the caller there will be a call back from a specified person at a predetermined time;
- Not being friendly, helpful, courteous, or receptive on the phone;
- Asking for too much information;
- Being too chatty on the phone;
- Not answering the phone during business hours - i.e. office hours are 8:30 to 5:00, yet no one answers the phone at 9:10 a.m. or 3:30 p.m.; and,
- Not verifying caller contact information -

i.e. full name (first and last name), phone number, area code.

Another BIG, BIG, No-No is asking the caller for their name immediately before contacting the person the caller wanted to speak. We've all been a victim of this scenario...

- *Caller - "Is Bob Blue there?"*
- *Receptionist - "Yes. Can I tell him who is calling?"*
- *Caller - "It's Mike Green." (Sometimes you would like to answer "No you can't. It's a surprise.")*

Receptionist places the call on hold. A minute later, the receptionist returns to the line to reply, "Bob is in a meeting" or "Bob has stepped out." The next comment is, "Can I take a message?" This is where the caller is thinking... "Is Bob really in a meeting or out of the office? Maybe Bob doesn't want to speak with me." This thought can be followed by a "Well, I guess he isn't interested in this contract, or tickets to the hockey game." My suggestion... don't ask the caller their name. If the person they were calling for is in, they should be in for everyone. If the person is in a meeting or completing work and can't or doesn't want to be disturbed, but is waiting for a specific caller, a wise approach and response would be "Bob is not available, may I take a message?" If the caller is the person Bob was waiting for, respond "Mike, Bob was expecting your call. He's asked me to let him know when you called. Can you hold and I'll get him for you?"

The receptionist, or anyone else who answers the telephone, is the most important front-line person in your office, business or organization. These are the people creating the lasting impression. Proper training, and the development of telephone policies and procedures can help to create a positive first impression. Some tips for effective telephone skills follows.

1. Smile before you answer the telephone. It's hard to be grumpy or have a poor tone in your voice when you're smiling.
2. The caller greeting should follow this format - Organization / Company name, your name, then followed by "How can I help you?" Don't say good morning or afternoon as it is too easy to get these confused (we've all done it due to wishful thinking).
3. Purchase a proper telephone message pad. The duplicate messages work best even when you work alone. You always have a record of who calls, and you have a copy in case you need to take the message with you.
4. Complete all the information on the telephone message form. This includes the date (month and day) and time of call.
5. Ask for the caller's first and last name. There may be more than one Bob or Karen, Sandra or Tom, that the recipient knows. Ensure you get the correct spelling of the name. The information may be required for follow-up by telephone, email or mail.
6. Repeat the information back to the caller (and slowly) - i.e. telephone number, name with spelling, and brief summary of the message (if given).
7. ALWAYS get the caller's telephone number (and caller's PLEASE ALWAYS leave your telephone number, no matter how often you call). When the recipient has the correct telephone number, a call can more expeditiously be returned. If the caller says "She has my number." A good response is, "Can I please get it again in case Karen calls in or she doesn't have it with her?"
8. Ask for a time the recipient can call back (when the caller will be available).
9. Record the name of the caller EVEN if the caller says they will call back. If it was important enough to call, it is important enough to leave a message. Let the person that was being called know that someone was thinking of them (it's kind of a sweet thought... don't you think?).
10. Keep note paper beside the telephone. Jot down key information during the conversation. Paraphrase the conversation often, and don't forget to use the caller's name frequently.
11. Before placing a caller on hold, ask if it is okay with the caller, and wait for a response (some callers will be surprised you've waited). This may be the caller's "one" call; imagine the caller's face when you accidentally disconnect the call.
12. Close the call with a review of the message, phone numbers, etc., and "Good bye" or "Thank you for calling" or "Have a nice day."
13. Remember the way you answer the telephone (and others around you) is a key part of the success of your organization and business, and you. You are the voice of the first impression. Don't be a "ding-a-ling."

Beverley O'Neil is a citizen of the Ktunaxa Nation, President of O'Neil Marketing & Consulting and Numa Communications Ltd., as well as a freelance writer. Please contact her for permission to reprint or use the article for publication. Also, feel free to send her your comments and suggestions.

Email: info@designingnations.com Tel. (604) 913.1905.