

Telephone Professionalism & The “Virtual Office”

By: Chris Bachman | April 26, 2014

The right phone system can play a crucial role in your business success. Unfortunately, it seems that a lot of common sense is left at the door when it comes to something as simple, and important, as your phone system. After a killer website your phone setup is the next most important aspect of your image with a client.

Let’s suppose that I have made it past your website and have convinced myself that I should give you a call. At this point, one of two things happen: A) **Voicemail**: I get an automated phone system, or; B) **Live**: Someone actually answers the phone. Here is where you make or break your business...

VOICEMAIL.

Have you called your phone lately? Try it now. Call as if you were a prospective client and see what happens. Better yet, ask some friends and family to make the calls; that way you can get some more honest answers than the ones you will likely give yourself.

The “Good” experience:

- A quick answer time.
- A pleasant, professionally recorded voice.
- Audio levels that are neither too high nor too low.
- Audio recordings that are clear and easy to understand. Music should be neutral, think Musak and not a radio. Try Classical or maybe Light Jazz. These are universally accepted as background music. Be careful with Classical to avoid symphonies as these can have huge volume swings along with brass and horn sections that blast you out of nowhere. Remember: smooth, steady, even volume.
- Minimal hold time: auto attendants should find you or provide a message option within 30 seconds, max.



The “Bad” experience:

- Rings for 30 seconds or more before responding. Especially, don’t make me wait for three minutes while your phone rings unanswered.

- Has a voice recording where the person sounds tired or agitated (yes, maybe you had to try recording it 37 times, but I don't need to know that).
- Even worse, has a recording that sounds like it was made twenty years ago (Say, this isn't one of those tape recorder answering boxes from 1983, is it?...Sure sounds like it.)
- Plays music that is either: A) So broken and warbled from having been played so many times that it sounds terrible (are you using a tape machine?!), B) Cranked up so high that I have to move the earpiece from my ear, or C) Plays your favorite punk-rap song – the one that I hate.
- Is using a radio for the on hold music.....Are you kidding? Either: A) It is a talk show about something I couldn't care less about; B) It is a political station, in which case you have a 75% chance of alienating the person on hold; C) Plays music I don't like, or; D) Has a DJ who breaks in every minute or so at a high volume to yell in my ear.
- It's full.... clearly nobody has bothered clearing off the old messages. So after waiting through your awful music, navigating your clunky extensions and being told to leave a message...you don't let me. Nice. I won't be calling again.



Know what my response is to these sorts of phone systems?"Click"

VIRTUAL OFFICE

It pays to get a professional "virtual office" or a quality phone system. My personal favorite, which I use at our office, is [Grasshopper](#); although there are a number out there to select from. Learn their "tree" structure, plan out how the extensions and messaging should work, and then think it through again.

Have a pro do your voice messaging, Grasshopper lets you select from different accents and male or female attendants. Select very neutral music to have as on-hold music. Think

of it this way...if you wouldn't play it in your waiting room for your best client, then don't play it to them on the phone.

Finally, TEST your system by calling every extension and answering it from the phone that would normally answer it. I once found that my extension, when answered from my cell phone, at my desk, was barely intelligible. The reception in the four-square foot area of my desk was horrible, and the result was that the person on the other end could barely hear me as my voice broke up. Who can say how much business was lost before someone mentioned it to me? I had to move my desk, but now people can understand me when we speak on the phone. A little thing, but so very important.

“LIVE” PHONE ETIQUETTE

Good Phone Etiquette:

- Answer the phone pleasantly and with a bit of surprised delight in your voice. You are happy they called, right?
- Keep your greeting to a nice, concise length. “Thank you for calling Superior Widgets. How may I help you?” This is NOT the place for a 30 second product pitch.
- If the person is going to be transferred to another person let them know that, and if there is going to be dead air during the transfer tell them that, too.
- Every 20 – 30 seconds reconnect with them and give them either a status update or the option to leave a message. Keeping a person informed while they wait is just common courtesy.
- Speak with the person, not at the person.



BAD Phone Etiquette:

- “*Thanks-for-calling-please-hold*”.....Really? This is not a game of Whack-a-Mole. My call is important and you just told me how unimportant you think it is. Take ten seconds to greet me and see if my call can't be handled quickly without placing me on hold. You can always offer to call me back; I appreciate that. If you don't have the ten seconds to answer the phone properly, then hire another person to help or let it go to voice mail.

- *“Thank you for calling Superior Widget home of the greatest widgets in the world including the super-duper widget which we happen to be having a special on, don’t forget to ask your representative about the super-duper widget and all our other great widgets....(breathe) How can I help you?.....Hello?...Hello?”*
- When you answer my call it is NOT about how much you can cram in my ear; what it IS about is what my need is in calling and how quickly you can help me. REMEMBER - I am not interested in what you have to say until I know you are interested in what I have to say.
- Sending me on a journey through your phone system without any indication as to what to expect. Is that dead air or was I disconnected? When will someone answer my call? I can’t sit on hold any longer; how do I leave a message?
- *“I am going to place you on hold..., someone will be with you soon (sometime)”*. No, no, no....that is like placing someone in a small, dark room with nothing but a torn, year-old magazine and telling them to “Sit, Stay.” How do you like it when it happens to you?
- Speaking AT me, not listening, asking me to repeat what I just said, forgetting my name, acting impatient or agitated...this is a PERSON on the other end of the phone. Show some of the courtesy that your mother raised you with. In this day of impersonal social media, emails and texting it is easy to forget basic common courtesies. Now is the time to remember them.



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