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TODAY

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First Impressions Make Lasting Impressions

Gerri Knilans

Thank you for calling ABC (company). If you know your party's extension, you may dial it at any time. For customer service, press 1. For technical support, press 2. For hours and location, press 3. For accounting, press 4. For a dial-by-name directory, press 5. For the operator, press 6."

In business, where success is contingent on creating, building, and maintaining relationships, making a good first impression is essential. Yet for many companies the first point of contact with potential clients, customers, vendors, and associates often is an impersonal and annoying automated attendant.

For countless callers, these telephone systems are tiresome, ineffective, and just plain unwelcoming. Complaints range from limited information to difficulty in navigating the menus. Regardless of the reason behind the dissatisfaction, negative experiences have serious consequences for companies, including driving business away. A 2012 nationwide poll of 2,000 respondents commissioned by Interactions Corporation (a company that provides virtual-assistant applications) indicated that 83 percent say they will avoid a company or stop giving it business after a poor experience with an automated phone system. Even for the caller lucky enough to get through to a real human being, the first interaction may be less than positive as the calls are unnecessarily and sometimes unprofessionally screened. The receptionist might have an unhelpful or hostile attitude or, even

worse, have poor verbal communication skills.

There is never a second chance to make a first impression, especially in a competitive market. However, for companies truly interested in delivering an experience that supports the corporate brand and represents its values, these issues can be easily remedied. By addressing the technology considerations and providing appropriate training, today's businesses can create optimal solutions for improving that first interaction.

EVOLUTION OF AUTOMATED VOICE-MESSAGING SERVICES

Advances in computer technology opened the door to automated messaging services with the advent of voicemail. As early as the 1970s, paging companies began handling client messages electronically. Speech recognition solutions emerged in the 1980s with the introduction of interactive voice response (IVR) technology, allowing a computer to interact with humans. Automated voice-messaging systems are often referred to as IVRs because they enable computers to respond to customers' calls by providing programmed answers to frequently asked questions. By the late 1990s, IVR technology coupled with computer telephony integration (CTI), which integrates and coordinates interactions between a telephone and a computer, set the stage for company call centers to adopt universal queuing and routing solutions.

Today, automated messaging systems are common in almost every industry and growing in popularity. StellaService Inc. is a company that objectively measures and rates the customer-service performance of online retailers. Ty McMahan, senior director of content for the company, says IVRs have been fairly standard for most retailers for quite some time. "There are 99 companies within the 130 major retailers that we currently cover daily that have used an IVR within the past six months (November 2013 to April 2014)," reports McMahan. "Of the Internet Retailer Top 25 by online revenue, all have used an IVR at some point during the last six months, and 23 of 25 use it almost daily." Exceptions include Nordstrom, which uses an IVR about half the time, and Zappos, which uses IVR technology about one-third of the time, according to McMahan.

The benefits of utilizing automated telephone systems are numerous. First and foremost, they allow companies to handle increased call volume. This can be an invaluable service, especially during sales events or when a company is experiencing rapid growth. By reducing the number of employees, phone automation provides a cost-effective alternative to hiring additional staff. For instance, AccessDirect, a company that provides affordable hosted PBX (public branch exchange) services, business voicemail, and fax services, offers an automated phone system adaptable to companies of all sizes. Its Direct Enterprise product enables customized call-routing, distributed sales-force messaging, customer-service queuing, or interoffice transfers for up to 1,000 employees. With monthly charges ranging from \$99.95 to \$399.95, even their most expensive system costs less than \$4,800 a year.

Automated systems allow receptionists to make better use of their time. Answering frequently asked questions and routing customer calls with ease, they free receptionists to concentrate on other responsibilities. For customers, the 24/7 access to information along with the ability to complete transactions such as reviewing bank accounts and paying credit-card balances makes life easier.

A SOURCE OF FRUSTRATION

Yet, as the old saying goes, most things that seem too good to be true typically are. Because automated systems are limited in the services, information, and answers they can provide, customers often find them not only impersonal but also frustrating. Some callers are offended when a machine picks up rather than a real person, assuming that the company lacks interest in having a personal relationship with its customers. This unwelcomed feeling is intensified when the automated systems appear to serve as company gatekeepers with general messages such as, "Leave your name and number and someone will get back to you at our earliest convenience." Regardless of a company's good intentions, many callers question the sincerity of that statement. This is especially true if they have received a similar message from another company that never followed through with its promise. Other messages are simply irritating. "Our support technicians are currently busy. Please hang up and try again later." When is later? Or "Your call is very important to us. Please stay on the line, and it will be answered in the order received." One technology company in San Antonio, Texas, makes an attempt to address this problem but doesn't go far enough. "You are the first caller in the queue. Please remain on the

line." But with no idea of how long the wait is, the individual is still at the mercy of the system. This situation goes from bad to worse when this "permanent hold" is filled with outdated or poor-quality music or is used as an opportunity to continually replay recorded company advertising.

Technical problems with the automated systems are equally annoying. Dropped calls due to glitches can force callers back to the main menu, or worse, require that they hang up and dial in again. While well-intended, voice-recognition software can backfire because of the difficulty some systems have in distinguishing dialects, accents, and other speech characteristics. Even a full voicemail can boot a caller out of the system and hang up without even a good-bye.

Unfortunately, many companies simply don't realize the impact these automated systems have on creating positive first impressions. They may be surprised by the results of a 2011 *Consumer Reports* survey that found "can't get a human on the phone" topped the list of customer gripes, with 67 percent saying they hung up without getting their issue resolved.

LIVE SUPPORT ALSO DISAPPOINTS

The live support offered by many companies can be just as disappointing. In failing to recognize the value of technology support and customer service, too often companies hire the least-skilled individuals. "Sometimes they will just hire anyone because they need to fill the position, when the real goal should be finding the right person," said Tricia Kleber, an HR veteran and director of payroll and benefits for Penn Schoen Berland. This anybody-will-do mind-set is a monumental mistake. Receptionists with poor communication

skills reflect negatively on the company as a whole. For example, when asked if John Doe is in, an untrained or unaware receptionist might not realize the appropriate response is a simple "yes" or "no," not "Who's calling?" For the caller, the latter is not only irrelevant but also rude. Additionally, interactions of this nature make callers feel they are less important than someone else, which gets the

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company-caller relationship off to a rocky start. Incorrect grammar such as "What is it regarding to?" is also unprofessional. Perhaps the most irritating of all is the outsourcing of call centers to foreign countries, where heavy accents and other language barriers create further issues.

HIRING PRACTICES

It is crucial for receptionists or other first-line representatives to be well trained, because they provide the first glimpse into the company's culture. "They [callers] will make snap decisions on the company based on their first impression of the receptionist or other support personnel," says Kleber. A poor first impression also can turn away promising job candidates. "With so much competition these days, a company can't afford to make mistakes with customer service," says Bob Silverforb, retired principal vice president and manager of human resources for Bechtel Corporation. "As a company, you are always selling, so it's critical to sell your company in the right light to have people come work for you," Silverforb claims. Kleber agrees.

"Companies often fail to realize you can win or lose contacts and candidates based upon the receptionist who takes the call," she notes.

The good news is that some companies seeking receptionists recognize this roadblock and are raising their expectations for receptionists. "Top employers are looking for front-office representatives with either proven experience in the field, professional certification, or both," reports Jennifer B. Allen, director of communications for National Association of Professional Receptionists (NAPR). Online job search giant Monster.com provides this summary of the typical responsibilities of the receptionist position: *Receptionists create the first impression at many types of businesses. They answer phones, transfer calls, take messages, greet visitors or customers, and offer refreshments to guests. In some organizations, they also do administrative tasks such as scheduling, typing, copying, filing, handling travel details, restocking kitchen supplies, and sorting mail.*¹

Yet, according to Allen, these frontline employees are typically underpaid. "The 2014 Outlook of the Bureau of Labor Statistics reports the median wage for receptionists in 2012 as \$12.49 as compared with \$16.99 for administrative assistants and secretaries," she says. As a result, many receptionists lack incentive to excel at their jobs, which can seriously affect a company's bottom line. For instance, a caller's request for a reservation at a high-end restaurant in Santa Monica, California, received this response: "You'll have to call back; the manager isn't here." Chances are the establishment lost not only this caller's business but the possibility of any referrals from this caller as well. With the popularity of social media, the ripple effect of a negative experience such as this one could tarnish the restaurant's reputation for years.

TRAINING

Along with poor hiring practices and low wages, many companies provide inadequate training for these receptionist/administrative support positions. Armed with limited knowledge of the company, its policies, and personnel, receptionists are ill-equipped to answer questions. A less than thorough understanding of the phone system may result in the receptionist's inability to assist callers. For instance, a receptionist at a New York-based manufacturer and distributor of *medical* equipment left a caller on hold for nearly five minutes before eventually sending the individual to the wrong department. Unfortunately, this is not an isolated occurrence.

At times, company training is out of step with today's customer expectations. A Canadian software company with a policy of sending all sales calls directly to voicemail trains their receptionists to ask, "Is this a sales call?" If the answer is yes, the receptionist tells the caller that the person he or she would like to contact is unavailable. For a company that also has to make sales calls to stay in business, this policy and the training that supports it can be particularly damaging.

Although specific training varies within every industry and from company to company, some aspects are universal. Following are six tips to help every business provide exceptional training and make the best first impression:

1. *Research training courses.* Many free courses are available online through YouTube and other outlets. Search for companies such as Maryland-based Business Training Works that provide receptionist and administrative training via onsite training and webinars. "NAPR offers

training and professional certification to both experienced and potential candidates for the position of professional receptionist," said Allen. "Our members are kept up-to-date with informative newsletters that track the latest trends and announce industry changes."

2. *Designate and train in-house staff to work with and oversee employees who provide live support.* Consider enthusiastic individuals with exceptional people skills and a teamwork mentality.
3. *Provide the tools and information needed to succeed.* These include, but are not limited to, company information handbooks, a summary of department information, a list of direct lines, and scripted answers to common and not-so-common questions.
4. *Build confidence by role-playing different or difficult scenarios.* For instance, instruct receptionists about how to properly screen calls. "Yes, he's in. May I tell him who's calling, please?" is an appropriate response.
5. *Stress the need for continuous professionalism, patience, and understanding, especially with demanding and challenging callers.* One phone call can leave a lasting impression. For example, Texas-based Marquis Software answers the phone by asking, "How can we exceed your expectations today?"
6. *Affirm the value of these key positions with incentives and rewards.* These might include, but are not limited to, monetary bonuses, company recognition, or paid time off.

TIMES ARE CHANGING

Times have changed considerably from the days when all company calls were routed

through the receptionist. With increased reliance on advanced technology, business operates differently today, yet people haven't changed. They still have the same need to be understood, respected, and assisted. In fact, Harris Interactive's 2012 Customer Experience Impact Report² found that 86 percent of customers quit doing business with a company because of bad customer service, up from 59 percent four years earlier.

Ideally, companies need to find a balance between technology and human interaction. In his book *Megatrends*, author John Naisbitt was an early promoter of this concept. "What happens is that whenever new technology is introduced into society, there must be a counterbalancing human response—that is, high touch—or the technology is rejected. The more high tech, the more high touch," said Naisbitt.³ One way to accomplish this balance is to provide a more seamless transition for the caller from the automated system to live support. Belden Inc., a leader in the design, manufacture, and marketing of signal transmission solutions for data networking, provides a great example. The first message on the company's system is, "For help at any time, press 0 for the operator."

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Making a positive first impression is not difficult. But in an era when technology is essential for business success, it does require adopting a new perspective. To accomplish this goal, consider these tips and ideas:

- *Implement the latest technologies to ensure customers are getting timely and accurate*

information. Don't stop there. Consistently monitor automated phone systems to ensure they are working correctly. When needed, update menus, personnel changes, and contact information.

- *Stress the importance of phone etiquette companywide.* "Sometimes company training needs to start at ground zero," says Silverforb. He advises that the increased reliance on texting and e-mails has led to decreased telephone usage and thus limited practice with good phone etiquette. "Any time there is any interaction between individuals, whether this is on the phone, by e-mail, etc., the receptionist must be polite and respectful of the other person and they have to be a good listener. It's all critical to having a valued customer on the other end," says Silverforb.
- *Professionalism is a must, but don't be afraid to customize automated messages to reflect a unique culture.* A great example is the message on a pediatrician's office located in Columbia, Missouri, which promotes its fun-loving atmosphere: "If you are calling from a rotary phone, you may want to consider upgrading."
- *Hire good people who are bright, articulate, and organized.* "They need to have a pleasant phone voice, be easy to understand, and display qualities that show they are friendly and likeable," says Kleber.
- *Make receptionist training a top priority.* Initiate new employees into the company culture by providing them with the information they need to succeed. Follow up with additional training sessions when needed, so all receptionists can reach their full potential. Silverforb suggests having new hires work closely with seasoned

professionals. "Periodically, give the new employee the chance to take the reins and answer the questions and do the work under the guidance of the person who is the incumbent," says Silverforb.

BALANCING ACT

For today's companies, providing a positive first impression is a balancing act. Automated phone systems, when used smartly, can be a welcomed addition for companies and callers alike, especially before or after normal business hours and on weekends. "Realistically, everybody has to accept that it is part of our culture these days. The more user friendly the experience, the better it's going to be for the company that installs it," says Silverforb.

But, at least for the time being, there is no substitute for human interaction, so hiring and retaining good people are essential. Overall, old-fashioned common courtesy and good manners never go out of style. Customers, clients, and associates expect to be treated with respect from the very start and throughout the working relationship. If not, their loyalty will dissipate, and they are likely to jump ship.

NOTES

1. Retrieved from <http://jobs.monster.com/v-administrative-q-receptionist-jobs.aspx>.
2. Retrieved from <http://blog.marketculture.com/2012/02/07/the-number-one-reason-every-moment-matters-in-customer-experience/>.
3. Naisbitt, J. (1982). *Megatrends: Ten new directions transforming our lives* (p. 39). New York, NY: Warner Books.

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